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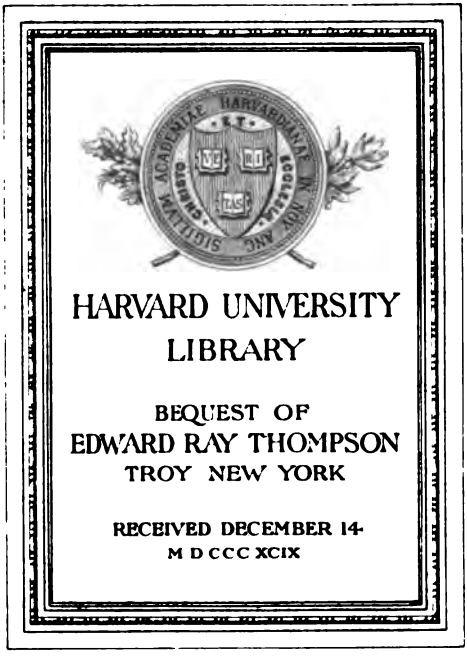
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VICTORIAN POETS.

VICTORIAN POETS

REVISED, AND EXTENDED, BY A SUPPLEMENTARY CHAPTER, TO THE FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE PERIOD UNDER REVIEW

BY

EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

AUTHOR OF "POETS OF AMERICA"

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

CAMBRIDGE

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VICTORIAN POETS.

Robert Browning,

VICTORIAN POETS.

CHAPTER IX.

ROBERT BROWNING.

Robert Browning: born in Camberwell, near London, 1812.

IN a study of Browning, the most original and unequal of living poets, three features obviously present themselves. His dramatic gift, so rare in these times, calls for recognition and analysis; his method — the eccentric quality of his expression — constantly intrudes upon the reader; lastly, the moral of his verse warrants a closer examination than we give to the sentiments of a more conventional poet. My own perception of the spirit which his poetry, despite his assumption of a purely dramatic purpose, has breathed from the outset, is one which I shall endeavor to convey in simple and direct terms.

Various other examples have served to illustrate the phases of a poet's life, but Browning arouses discussion with respect to the elements of poetry as an art. Hitherto I have given some account of an author's career and writings before proffering a critical estimate of the latter. But this man's genius is so peculiar, and he has been so isolated in style and purpose, that I know not how to speak of his works without first seeking a key to their interpretation, and hence must reverse in some measure the order hitherto pursued.

I.

Character of his dramatic genius.

IT is customary to call Browning a dramatist, and without doubt he represents the dramatic element, such as it is, of the recent English school. He counts among his admirers many intellectual persons, some of whom pronounce him the greatest dramatic poet since Shakespeare, and one has said that "it is to him we must pay homage for whatever is good, and great, and profound, in the second period of the Poetic Drama of England."

This may be true; nevertheless, it also should be declared, with certain modifications, that Robert Browning, in the original sense of the term, is not a dramatic poet at all.

Procter, in the preface to a collection of his own songs, remarks with precision and truth: "It is, in fact, this power of forgetting himself, and of imagining and fashioning characters different from his own, which constitutes the dramatic quality. A man who can set aside his own idiosyncrasy is half a dramatist." Although Browning's earlier poems were in the form of plays, and have a dramatic purpose, they are at the opposite remove, in spirit and method, from the models of the true histrionic era, — the work of Fletcher, Webster, and Shakespeare. They have the sacred rage and fire, but the flame is that of Browning, and not of the separate creations which he strives to inform.

The true dramatic period.

The early drama was the mouthpiece of a passionate and adventurous era. The stage bore to the period the relations of the modern novel and newspaper to our own, not only holding the mirror up to nature, but showing the "very age and body of the

time." It was a vital growth, sprung from the people, and having a reflex action upon their imagination and conduct. Even in Queen Anne's day the theatre was the meeting-place of wits, and, if the plays were meaner, it was because they copied the manners of an artificial world. But, in either case, the playwrights were in no more hazard of representing their own natures, in one rôle after another, than are the leader-writers in their versatile articles upon topics of our day. They invented a score of characters, or took them from real life, grouped them with consummate effect, placed them in dramatic situations, lightened tragedy with mirth, mellowed comedy with pathos, and produced a healthful and objective dramatic literature. They looked outward, not inward: their imagination was the richer for it, and of a more varied kind.

The modern stage.

The stage still has its office, but one more subsidiary than of old. Our own age is no less stirring than was the true dramatic period, and is far more subtile in thought. But the poets fail to represent it objectively, and the drama does not act as a safety-valve for the escape of extreme passion and desire. That office the novelists have undertaken, while the press brings its dramas to every fireside. Yet the form of the play still seems to a poet the most comprehensive mould in which to cast a masterpiece. It is a combination of scenic and plastic art; it includes monologue, dialogue, and song, — action and meditation, — man and woman, the lover, the soldier, and the thinker, — all vivified by the imagination, and each essential to the completeness of the whole. Even to poets like Byron, who have no perception of natures differing from their own, it has a fascination

Cp. "*Poets of America*": *pp.* 467–469.

as a vehicle of expression, and the result is seen in "Sardanapalus" and "Cain." Hence the closet-drama; and although praiseworthy efforts, as in "Virginius" and "Ion," have been made to revive the early method, these modern stage-plays often are unpoetical and tame. Most of what is excellent in our dramatic verse is to be found in plays that could not be successfully enacted.

Browning's subjectivity.

While Browning's earlier poems are in the dramatic form, his own personality is manifest in the speech and movement of almost every character of each piece. His spirit is infused, as if by metempsychosis, within them all, and forces each to assume a strange Pentecostal tone, which we discover to be that of the poet himself. Bass, treble, or recitative,—whether in pleading, invective, or banter, — the voice still is there. But while his characters have a common manner and diction, we become so wonted to the latter that it seems like a new dialect which we have mastered for the sake of its literature. This feeling is acquired after some acquaintance with his poems, and not upon a first or casual reading of them.

The brief, separate pieces, which he terms "dramatic lyrics," are just as properly dramas as are many of his five-act plays. Several of the latter were intended for stage-production. In these we feel that the author's special genius is hampered, so that the student of Browning deems them less rich and rare than his strictly characteristic essays. Even in the most conventional, this poet cannot refrain from the long monologues, stilted action, and metaphysical discursion, which mark the closet-drama and unfit a composition for the stage. His chief success is in the portrayal of single characters and specific moods.

His special mission.

I would not be understood to praise his originality at the expense of his greatness. His mission has been that of exploring those secret regions which generate the forces whose outward phenomena it is for the playwrights to illustrate. He has opened a new field for the display of emotional power,—founding, so to speak, a sub-dramatic school of poetry, whose office is to follow the workings of the mind, to discover the impalpable elements of which human motives and passions are composed. The greatest forces are the most elusive, the unseen mightier than the seen; modern genius chooses to seek for the under-currents of the soul rather than to depict acts and situations. Browning, as the poet of psychology, escapes to that stronghold whither, as I have said, science and materialism are not yet prepared to follow him. How shall the chemist read the soul? No former poet has so relied upon this province for the excursions of his muse. True, he explores by night, stumbles, halts, has vague ideas of the topography, and often goes back upon his course. But, though others complete the unfinished work of Columbus, it is to him that we award the glory of discovery,—not to the engineers and colonists that succeed him, however firmly they plant themselves and correctly map out the now undisputed land.

II.

Analysis of Browning's method.

BROWNING'S manner is so eccentric as to challenge attention and greatly affect our estimate of him as a poet. Eccentricity is not a proof of genius, and even an artist should remember that originality consists not only in doing things differently, but also in "doing

things better." The genius of Shakespeare and Molière enlarged and beautified their style; it did not distort it. Again, the grammarian's statement is true, that Poetry is a means of Expression. A poet may differ from other men in having profounder emotions and clearer perceptions, but this is not for him to assume, nor a claim which they are swift to grant. The lines,

What constitutes a Poet.

> "O many are the poets that are sown
> By Nature! men endowed with highest gifts,
> The vision and the faculty divine;
> Yet wanting the accomplishment of verse,"

imply that the recognized poet is one who gives voice, in expressive language, to the common thought and feeling which lie deeper than ordinary speech. He is the interpreter: moreover, he is the maker, — an artist of the beautiful, the inventor of harmonious numbers which shall be a lure and a repose.

A poet, however emotional or rich in thought, must not fail to express his conception and make his work attractive. Over-possession is worth less than a more commonplace faculty; he that has the former is a sorrow to himself and a vexation to his hearers, while one whose speech is equal to his needs, and who knows his limitations, adds something to the treasury of song, and is able to shine in his place, "and be content." Certain effects are suggested by nature; the poet discovers new combinations within the ground which these afford. Ruskin has shown that in the course of years, though long at fault, the masses come to appreciate any admirable work. By inversion, if, after a long time has passed, the world still is repelled by a singer, and finds neither rest nor music in him, the fault is not with the world;

Ruskin on popular appreciation.

there is something deficient in his genius, — he is so much the less a poet.

Poetry. Misuse of the term.

The distinction between poetry and prose must be sharply observed. Poetry is an art, — a specific fact, which, owing to the vagueness fostered by minor wits, we do not sufficiently insist upon. We hear it said that an eloquent prose passage is poetry, that a sunset is a poem, and so on. This is well enough for rhetorical effect, yet wholly untrue, and no poet should permit himself to talk in that way. Poetry is poetry, because it differs from prose; it is artificial, and gives us pleasure because we know it to be so. It is beautiful thought expressed in rhythmical form, not half expressed or uttered in the form of prose. It is a metrical structure; a spirit not disembodied, but in the flesh, — so as to affect the senses of living men. Such is the poetry of Earth; what that of a more spiritual region may be I know not. Milton and Keats never were in doubt as to the meaning of their art. It is true that fine prose is a higher form of expression than wretched verse; but when a distinguished young English poet thus writes to me, —

Cp. "*Poets of America*": *pp.* 327, 373.

"My own impression is that Verse is an inferior, or infant, form of speech, which will ultimately perish altogether. . . . . The Seer, the Vates, the teacher of a new truth, is single, while what you call artists are legion,"

Letter from a rising English poet.

— when I read these words, I remember that the few great seers have furnished models for the simplest and greatest forms of art; I feel that this poet is growing heretical with respect, not to the law of custom, but to a law which is above us all; I fear to discover a want of beauty, a vague transcendentalism, rather than a clear inspiration, in his verse, —

Dangers of transcendentalism.

Cp. "*Poets of America*": *pp.* 168, 169, 249, 253.

to see him become prosaic and substitute rhetoric for passion, realism for naturalness, affectation for lofty thought, and, "having been praised for bluntness," to "affect a saucy roughness." In short, he is on the edge of danger. Yet his remark denotes a just impatience of forms so hackneyed that, once beautiful, they now are stale and corrupt. It may be necessary, with the Pre-Raphaelites, to escape their thraldom and begin anew. But the poet is a creator, not an iconoclast, and never will tamely endeavor to say in prose what can only be expressed in song. And I have faith that my friend's wings will unfold, in spite of himself, and lift him bravely as ever on their accustomed flights.

Impression produced by Browning's work.

Has the lapse of years made Browning any more attractive to the masses, or even to the judicious few? He is said to have "succeeded by a series of failures," and so he has, as far as notoriety means success, and despite the perpetuation of his faults. But what is the fact which strikes the admiring and sympathetic student of his poetry and career? Distrusting my own judgment, I asked a clear and impartial thinker, — "How does Browning's work impress you?" His reply, after a moment's consideration, was: "Now that I try to formulate the sensation which it always has given me, his work seems that of a grand intellect painfully striving for adequate use and expression, and never quite attaining either." This was, and is, precisely my own feeling. The question arises, What is at fault? Browning's genius, his chosen mode of expression, his period, or one and all of these? After the flush of youth is over, a poet must have a wise method, if he would move ahead. He must improve upon instinct by experience

and common-sense. There is something amiss in one who has to grope for his theme and cannot adjust himself to his period; especially in one who cannot agreeably handle such themes as he arrives at. More than this, however, is the difficulty in Browning's case. Expression is the flower of thought; a fine imagination is wont to be rhythmical and creative, and many passages, scattered throughout Browning's works, show that his is no exception. It is a certain caprice or perverseness of method, that, by long practice, has injured his gift of expression; while an abnormal power of ratiocination, and a prosaic regard for details, have handicapped him from the beginning. Besides, in mental arrogance and scorn of authority, he has insulted Beauty herself, and furnished too much excuse for small offenders. What may be condoned in one of his breed is intolerable when mimicked by every jackanapes and self-appointed reformer.

Defective and capricious expression.

A group of evils, then, has interfered with the greatness of his poetry. His style is that of a man caught in a morass of ideas through which he has to travel,—wearily floundering, grasping here and there, and often sinking deeper until there seems no prospect of getting through. His latest works have been more involved and excursive, less beautiful and elevating, than most of those which preceded them. Possibly his theory is that which was his wife's instinct, — a man being more apt than a woman with some reason for what he does, — that poetry is valuable *only* for the statement which it makes, and must always be subordinate thereto. Nevertheless, Emerson, in this country, seems to have followed a kindred method; and who of our poets is greater, or so wise?

His recent productions.

III.

Fine natural gifts.

BROWNING'S early lyrics, and occasional passages of recent date, show that he has melodious intervals, and can be very artistic with no loss of original power. Often the ring of his verse is sonorous, and overcomes the jagged consonantal diction with stirring lyrical effect. The "Cavalier Tunes" are examples. Such choruses as

> "Marching along, fifty-score strong,
> Great-hearted gentlemen, singing this song!"
>
> "King Charles, and who 'll do him right now?
> King Charles, and who 's ripe for fight now?
> Give a rouse: here 's, in Hell's despite now,
> King Charles!"

Various stirring lyrics.

— these, with, "Boot, saddle, to horse, and away!" show that Browning can put in verse the spirit of a historic period, and has, or had, in him the making of a lyric poet. How fresh and wholesome this work! Finer still that superb stirrup-piece, best of its class in the language, "How they brought the good news from Ghent to Aix." "Ratisbon" and "The Lost Leader," no less, are poems that fasten themselves upon literature, and will not be forgotten. The old fire flashes out, thirty years after, in "Hervé Riel," another vigorous production, — unevenly sustained, but superior to Longfellow's legendary ballads and sagas. From among lighter pieces I will select for present mention two, very unlike each other; one, as delightful a child's poem as ever was written, in fancy and airy extravagance, and having a wildness and pathos all its own, — the daintiest bit of folk-lore in English verse, — to what should I refer but "The Pied Piper of Hamelin?" The author made a strong

bid for the love of children, when he placed "By Robert Browning" at its head, in the collection of his poems. The other,

> "Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!
> Sit and watch by her side an hour,"

appeals, like Wordsworth's "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," and Landor's "Rose Aylmer," to the hearts of learned and unlettered, one and all.

Evils of his general style.

Browning's style is the more aggressive, because, in compelling beauty itself to suffer a change and conform to all exigencies, it presents such a contrast to the refined art of our day. I have shown that much of this is due to natural awkwardness,— but that the author is able, on fortunate occasions, to better his work, has just been amply illustrated. More often he either has let his verse have its way, or has shaped a theory of art by his own restrictions, and with that contempt for the structure of his song which Plato and St. Paul entertained for their fleshly bodies. If the mischief ceased here, it would not be so bad, but his genius has won pupils who copy his vices without his strength. He and his wife injured each the other's style as much as they sustained their common aspiration and love of poesy. To be sure, there was a strange similarity, by nature, between their modes of speech; and what I have said of the woman's obscurity, affectations, elisions, will apply to the man's — with his *i'thes* and *o'thes*, his dashes, breaks, halting measures, and oracular exclamations that convey no dramatic meaning to the reader. Her verse is the more spasmodic; his, the more metaphysical, and, while effective in the best of his dramatic lyrics, is constantly running into impertinences worse

The two Brownings.

than those of his poorest imitators, and which would not be tolerated for a moment in a lesser poet. Parodies on his style, thrown off as burlesques, are more intelligible than much of his "Dramatis Personæ."

Disregard of the fitness of things.

Unlike Tennyson, he does not comprehend the *limits* of a theme; nor is he careful as to the relative importance either of themes or details; his mind is so alert that its minutest turn of thought must be uttered; he dwells with equal precision upon the meanest and grandest objects, and laboriously jots down every point that occurs to him, — parenthesis within parenthesis, — until we have a tangle as intricate as the line drawn by an anemometer upon the recording-sheet. The poem is all zigzag, criss-cross, at odds and ends, — and, though we come out right at last, strength and patience are exhausted in mastering it. Apply the rule that nothing should be told in verse which can be told in prose, and half his measures would be condemned; since their chief metrical purpose is, through the stress of rhythm, to fix our attention, by a certain unpleasant fascination, upon a process of reasoning from which it otherwise would break away.

Irreverence.

For so much of Browning's crudeness as comes from inability to express himself, or to find a proper theme, he may readily be forgiven; but whatever is due to real or assumed irreverence for the divine art, among whose votaries he stands enrolled, is a grievous wrong, unworthy of the humble and delightful spirit of a true craftsman. He forgets that art is the bride of the imagination, from whose embraces true creative work must spring.

Crude realism.

Lastly, concerning realism, while poets are, as Mrs. Browning said, "your only truth-tellers," it is not well that repulsive or petty facts should

always be recorded; only the high, essential truths demand a poet's illumination. The obscurity wherein Browning disguises his realism is but the semblance of imagination,—a mist through which rugged details jut out, while the central truth is feebly to be seen.

IV.

Browning's dramas, and "Sordello."

AFTER a period of study at the London University young Browning, in 1832, went to Italy, and acquired a remarkable knowledge of the Italian life and language. He mingled with all classes of the people, mastered details, and rummaged among the monasteries of Lombardy and Venice, studying mediæval history, and filling his mind with the relics of a bygone time. All this had much to do with the bent of his subsequent work, and possibly was of more benefit to his learning than to his ideality.

"Paracelsus." 1835-36.

At the age of twenty-three he published his first drama, *Paracelsus;* a most unique production,—strictly speaking, a metaphysical dialogue, as noticeable for analytic power as the romances of Keats for pure beauty. It did not find many readers, but no man of letters could peruse it without seeing that a genuine poet had come to light. From that time the author moved in the literary society of London, and was recognized as one who had done something and might do something more. The play is "Faust," with the action and passion, and much of the poetry and music,—upon which the fascination of the German work depends,—omitted; the hero resembles "Faust" in the double aspiration to know and to enjoy, to search out mystical knowledge, yet drink at all the fountains of pleasure,—lest, after a long struggle,

failing of knowledge, he should have lived in vain. It must be understood that Mr. Browning's Paracelsus was his own creation: a man of heroic longings, observed at various intervals, from his twentieth year, in which he leaves his native hamlet, until he dies at the age of forty-eight, — obscure, and with his ideal seemingly unattained; not the juggler, empiric, and charlatan of history, whose record the poet frankly gives us in a foot-note.

This poem has every characteristic of Browning's genius. The verse is as strong and as weak as the best and worst he has composed during thirty years, and is pitched in a key now familiar to us all. "Paracelsus," the fruit of his youth, serves as well for a study of this poet as any later effort, and, though inferior to "Pippa Passes" and "In a Balcony," is much better than his newest romance in blank verse. I cannot agree with critics who say that he did his poorest work first and has been moving along an ascending scale; on the contrary, his faults and beauties have been somewhat evenly distributed throughout his career. We are vexed in "Paracelsus" by a vice that haunts him still, — that tedious garrulity which, however relieved by beautiful passages, palls on the reader and weakens the general effect. As an offset, he displays in this poem, with respect to every kind of poetic faculty except the sense of proportion, gifts equal to those of any compeer. By turns he is surpassingly fine. We have strong dramatic diction: —

Characteristic merits and defects.

> "Festus, strange secrets are let out by Death,
> Who blabs so oft the follies of this world:
> And I am Death's familiar, as you know.

I helped a man to die, some few weeks since;
. . . . .
. . . . No mean trick
He left untried; and truly wellnigh wormed
All traces of God's finger out of him.
Then died, grown old; and just an hour before—
Having lain long with blank and soulless eyes—
He sate up suddenly, and with natural voice
Said, that in spite of thick air and closed doors
God told him it was June; and he knew well,
Without such telling, harebells grew in June;
And all that kings could ever give or take
Would not be precious as those blooms to him."

Browning's blank verse.

The conception is old as Shakespeare, but the manner is large and effective. Few authors vary the breaks and pauses of their blank verse so naturally as Browning, and none can so well dare to extend the proper limits of a poem. Here, as in later plays, he shows a more realistic perception of scenery and nature than is common with dramatic poets. We have a bit of painting at the outset, in the passage beginning,

"Nay, Autumn wins you best by this its mute
Appeal to sympathy for its decay!"

and others, equally fine and true, are scattered throughout the dialogue.

"Paracelsus" is meant to illustrate the growth and progress of a lofty spirit, groping in the darkness of his time. He first aspires to knowledge, and fails; then to pleasure and knowledge, and equally fails — to human eyes. The secret ever seems close at hand: —

"Ah, the curse, Aprile, Aprile!
We get so near — so very, very near!
'T is an old tale: Jove strikes the Titans down
Not when they set about their mountain-piling,
But when another rock would crown their work!"

Now, it is a part of Browning's life-long habit, that he here refuses to judge by ordinary standards, and makes the hero's attainment lie even in his failure and death. There are few more daring assertions of the soul's absolute freedom than the words of Festus, impressed by the nobility of his dying friend: —

> "I am for noble Aureole, God!
> I am upon his side, come weal or woe!
> His portion shall be mine! He has done well!
> I would have sinned, had I been strong enough,
> As he has sinned! Reward him, or I waive
> Reward! If thou canst find no place for him
> He shall be king elsewhere, and I will be
> His slave forever! There are two of us!"

The drama is well worth preserving, and even now a curious and highly suggestive study. Its lyrical interludes seem out of place. As an author's first drama, it promised more for his future than if it had been a finished production, and in any other case but that of the capricious, tongue-tied Browning, the promise might have been abundantly fulfilled.

"Strafford," 1837.

In "Strafford," his second drama, the interest also centres upon the struggles and motives of one heroic personage, this time entangled in a fatal mesh of great events. Apparently the poet, after some experience of authorship, wished to commend his work to popular sympathy, and tried to write a play that should be fitted for the stage; hence a tragedy, dedicated to Macready, of which the chief character, — the hapless Earl of Strafford, — was assumed by that tragedian. The piece is said to have been well received, but ran for five nights only, one of the chief actors suddenly withdrawing from the cast. The characters are eccentrically drawn, and are more

serious and mystical than even the gloom of their period would demand. It is hard to perceive the motives of Lady Carlisle and the Queen; there is no underplot of love in the play, to develop the womanly element, nor has it the humor of the great playwrights, — so essential to dramatic contrast, and for which the Puritans and the London populace might afford rich material. Imagine Macready stalking portentously through the piece, the audience trying to follow the story, and listening with patience to the solemn speeches of Pym and Strafford, which answer for a death-scene at the close. The language is more natural than is usual with Browning, but here, where he is least eccentric, he becomes tame — until we see that he is out of his element, and prefer his striking psychology to a forced attempt at writing of the academic kind.

Something of this must have struck the poet himself, for, as if chagrined at his effort, he swung back to the other extreme, and beyond his early starting-place: farther, happily, than any point he since has ventured to reach. In no one of his recent works has he been quite so "hard," loquacious, and impracticable as in the renowned nondescript entitled *Sordello*. Twenty-three years after its appearance he owned that its "faults of expression were many," and added, "but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted." The acknowledgment was partial. "Sordello" is a fault throughout, in conception and execution: nothing is "expressed," not even the "incidents in the development of a soul," though such incidents may have had some nebulous origin in the poet's mind. It is asking too much of our care for a book or a man that we should surmount this chaotic

"*Sordello*," 1840.

mass of word-building. Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus" is a hard study, but, once entered upon, how poetical! what lofty episodes! what wisdom, beauty, and scorn! Few such treasures await him that would read the eleven thousand verses into which the fatal facility of the rhymed-heroic measure has led the muse of Browning. The structure, by its very ugliness and bulk, like some half-buried colossus in the desert, may survive a lapse of time. I cannot persuade myself to solicit credit for deeper insight by differing from the common judgment with regard to this unattractive prodigy.

It had its uses, seemingly, in acting as a purge to cleanse the visual humors of the poet's eyes and to leave his general system in an auspicious condition. His next six years were devoted to the composition of a picturesque group of dramas, — the exact order of which escapes me, but which finally were collected in *Bells and Pomegranates*, a popular edition, issued in serial numbers, of this maturer work. "Luria," "King Victor and King Charles," and "The Return of the Druses," are stately pieces, historical or legendary, cast in full stage-form. In Luria we again see Browning's favorite characterization, from a different point of view. This is a large-moulded, suffering hero, akin, if disturbed in conscience, to Wallenstein, — if devoted and magnanimous, to Othello. Luria, the Moor, is like Othello in many ways: a brave and skilful general, who serves Florence (instead of Venice), and declares,

"*Bells and Pomegranates*," 1840–46.

"*Luria*."

> "I can and have perhaps obliged the state,
> Nor paid a mere son's duty."

He is so true and simple, that Domizia says of him,

"How plainly is true greatness charactered
By such unconsciousness as Luria's here,
And sharing least the secret of itself!"

A favorite characterization.

Browning makes devotion to an ideal or trust, however unworthy of it, the chief trait of this class of personages. Strafford dies in behalf of ungrateful Charles; Luria is sacrificed by the Florence he has saved, and destroys himself at the moment when love and honor are hastening, too late, to crown him. Djabal, false to himself, is true to the cause of the Druses, and at last dies in expiation of his fault. Valence, in "Colombe's Birthday," shows devotion of a double kind, but is rewarded for his fidelity and honor. Luitolfo, in "A Soul's Tragedy," is of a kindred type. But I am anticipating. The language of "Luria" often is in the grand manner. In depicting the Moorish general and his friend Husain,—brooding, generous children of the sun,—the soldierly Tiburzio, painted with a few master-strokes,—and in the element of Italian craft and intrigue, the author is at home and well served by his knowledge of mediæval times. That is an eloquent speech of Domizia, near the end of the fourth act. Despite the poverty of action, and the prolonged harangues, this drama is worthy of its dedication to Landor and the wish that it might be "read by his light": almost worthy (Landor always weighed out gold for silver!) of the old bard's munificent return of praise:—

Landor to Browning.

"Shakespeare is not our poet but the world's,
Therefore on him no speech! and brief for thee,
Browning! Since Chaucer was alive and hale,
No man hath walked along our roads with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse. But warmer climes

Give brighter plumage, stronger wing: the breeze
Of Alpine heights thou playest with, borne on
Beyond Sorrento and Amalfi, where
The Siren waits thee, singing song for song."

"The Return of the Druses."

"The Return of the Druses," with its scenic and choric effects, is like some of Byron's plays: the scene, an isle of the Sporades; the legend, half-Venetian, half-Oriental, one that only Browning could make available. The girl Anael is an impassioned character, divided between adoration for Hakeem, the god of her race, — whom she believes incarnate in Djabal, — and her love for Djabal as a man. The tragedy, amid a good deal of trite and pedantic language, is marked by heroic situations and sudden dramatic catastrophes. Several brilliant points are made: one, where the Prefect lifts the arras, on the other side of which death awaits him, and says, —

"This is the first time for long years I enter
Thus, without feeling just as if I lifted
The lid up of my tomb! . . . .
. . . . .
Let me repeat — for the first time, no draught
Coming as from a sepulchre salutes me!"

A moment, and the dagger is through his heart. Another such is the wonder and contempt of Anael at finding Djabal no deity, but an impostor; while perhaps the most telling point in the whole series of Browning's plays is her cry of *Hakeem!* made when she comes to denounce Djabal, but, moved by love, proclaims him as the god, and falls dead with the effort. The poet, however, is justly censured for too frequently taking off his personages by the intensity of their own passions, without recourse to the dagger

and bowl. He rarely does it after the "high Roman fashion."

This tragedy observes the classic unities of time and place. A hall in the Prefect's palace is made to cover its entire action, which occupies only one day. In its earnest pitch and lack of sprightly underplot, it also is Greek or Italian. Not long ago, listening to Salvini in "Samson" and other plays, I was struck by their likeness, in simplicity of action and costume, to the antique dramas. The actors were sufficient to themselves, and the audience was intent upon their lofty speech and passion; there was no lack of interest, but a refreshing spiritual elevation. The Gothic method better suits the English stage, nevertheless we need not refuse to profit by the experience of other lands. Our poetry, like the language, should draw its riches from all tongues and races, and well can endure a larger infusion of the ancient grandeur and simplicity. In the play before us Browning has but renewed the debt, long since incurred, of English literature to the Italian, — greater than that to all other sources combined. Not without reason, in "De Gustibus," he sang, —

The Classical and Gothic methods in dramatic art.

> "Open my heart and you will see,
> Graved inside of it, 'Italy.'
> Such lovers old are I and she;
> So it always was, so it still shall be!"

"King Victor" is one of those conventional plays in which he appears to ordinary advantage. His three dramatic masterpieces are "Pippa Passes," "A Blot in the 'Scutcheon," and "Colombe's Birthday."

"King Victor and King Charles."

The last-named play, inscribed to Barry Cornwall, really is a fresh and lovely little drama. The fair

"Colombe's Birthday."

young heroine has possessed her duchy for a single year, and now, upon her birthday, as she unsuspectingly awaits the greetings of her courtiers, is called upon to surrender her inheritance to Prince Berthold, decreed to be the lawful heir. At the same time Valence, a poor advocate of Cleves, seeks audience in behalf of his suffering townsmen, and ends by defending the Duchess's title to her rank. She loves him, and is so impressed by his nobility and courage as to decline the hand of the Prince, and surrender her duchy, to become the wife of Valence, with whom she joyfully retires to the ruined castle where her youth was spent. This play might be performed to the great interest of an audience composed exclusively of intellectual persons, who could follow the elaborate dialogue and would be charmed with its poetry and subtile thought. Once accept the manner of Browning, and you must be pleased with the delineation of the characters. "Colombe" herself is exquisite, and like one of Shakespeare's women. Valence seems too harsh and dry to win her, and her choice, despite his loyalty and intellect, is hardly defensible. Still, "Colombe's Birthday" is the most natural and winsome of the author's stage-plays.

"A Blot in the 'Scutcheon."

"A Blot in the 'Scutcheon" was brought out at Drury Lane, in 1843. It is full of poetry and pathos, but there is little in it to relieve the human spirit, — which cannot bear too much of earnestness and woe added to the mystery and burden of our daily lives. Yet the piece has such tragic strength as to stamp the author as a great poet, though in a narrow range. One almost forgets the singular improbabilities of the story, the *blasé* talk of the child-lovers (an English Juliet of fourteen is against nature), the stiff language

of the retainers, and various other blemishes. There is a serenade in which, unchecked by his fear of detection, Mertoun is made to sing under Mildred's window, —

"There 's a woman like the dew-drop, she 's so purer than the purest!"

This song, composed seven years before the poet's meeting with Miss Barrett, is precisely in the style of "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," and other ballads of the gifted woman who became his wife.

The most simple and varied of his plays — that which shows every side of his genius, has most lightness and strength, and all in all may be termed a representative poem — is the beautiful drama with the quaint title of "Pippa Passes." It is a cluster of four scenes, with prologue, epilogue, and interludes; half prose, half poetry, varying with the refinement of the dialogue. Pippa is a delicately pure, good, blithesome peasant-maid. "'T is but a little black-eyed, pretty, singing Felippa, gay silk-winding girl," — though with token, ere the end, that she is the child of a nobleman, put out of the way by a villain, Maffeo, at instigation of the next heir. Pippa knows nothing of this, but is piously content with her life of toil. It is New Year's Day at Asolo. She springs from bed, in her garret chamber, at sunrise, — resolved to enjoy to the full her sole holiday: she will not "squander a wavelet" of it, not a "mite of her twelve hours' treasure." Others can be happy throughout the year: haughty Ottima and Sebald, the lovers on the hill; Jules and Phene, the artist and his bride; Luigi and his mother; Monsignor, the Bishop; but Pippa has only this one day to enjoy. She envies these great

"Pippa Passes."

ones a little, but reflects that God's love is best, after all. And yet, how little can she do! How can she possibly affect the world? Thus she muses, and goes out, singing, to her holiday and the sunshine. Now, it so happens that she passes, this day, each of the groups or persons we have named, at an important crisis in their lives, and they hear her various carols as she trills them forth in the innocent gladness of her heart. Sebald and Ottima have murdered the latter's aged husband, and are unremorseful in their guilty love. Jules is the victim of a fraud practised by his rival artists, who have put in his way a young girl, a paid model, whom he believes to be a pure and cultured maiden. He has married her, and just discovered the imposture. Luigi is hesitating whether to join a patriotic conspiracy. Monsignor is tempted by Maffeo to overlook his late brother's murder, for the sake of the estates, and utterly to ruin Pippa.

Intense passion and beauty.

The scene between Ottima and Sebald is the most intense and striking passage of all Browning's poetry, and, possibly, of any dramatic verse composed during his lifetime up to the date of this play. A passionate esoteric theme is treated with such vigor and skill as to free it from any debasing taint, in the dialogue from which I quote: —

"*Ottima.* . . . . The past, would you give up the past
Such as it is, pleasure and crime together?
Give up that noon I owned my love for you —
The garden's silence — even the single bee,
Persisting in his toil, suddenly stopt,
And where he hid you only could surmise
By some campanula's chalice set a-swing
As he clung there — 'Yes, I love you!'
Sebald. And I drew
Back; put far back your face with both my hands

Lest you should grow too full of me — your face
So seemed athirst for my whole soul and body!
. . . . .
Ottima. Then our crowning night —
Sebald. The July night?
Ottima. The day of it too, Sebald!
When the heaven's pillars seemed o'erbowed with heat,
Its black-blue canopy seemed let descend
Close on us both, to weigh down each to each,
And smother up all life except our life.
So lay we till the storm came.
Sebald. How it came!
Ottima. Buried in woods we lay, you recollect;
Swift ran the searching tempest overhead;
And ever and anon some bright white shaft
Burnt thro' the pine-tree roof, — here burnt and there,
As if God's messenger thro' the close wood screen
Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture,
Feeling for guilty thee and me: then broke
The thunder like a whole sea overhead —
Sebald. Yes!
. . . . .
How did we ever rise?
Was it that we slept? Why did it end?
Ottima. I felt you,
Fresh tapering to a point the ruffled ends
Of my loose locks 'twixt both your humid lips —
(My hair is fallen now — knot it again!)
Sebald. I kiss you now, dear Ottima, now, and now!
This way? Will you forgive me — be once more
My great queen?
Ottima. Bind it thrice about my brow;
Crown me your queen, your spirit's arbitress,
Magnificent in sin. Say that!
Sebald. I crown you
My great white queen, my spirit's arbitress,
Magnificent —"

See "Pippa Passes," Scene I.

But here Pippa passes, singing

"God's in his heaven, —
All 's right with the world!"

Sebald is stricken with fear and remorse; his paramour becomes hideous in his eyes; he bids her dress her shoulders, wipe off that paint, and leave him, for he hates her! She, the woman, is at least true to her lover, and prays God to be merciful, not to her, but to him.

The scene changes to the post-nuptial meeting of Jules and Phene, and then in succession to the other passages and characters we have mentioned. All these persons are vitally affected, — have their lives changed, merely by Pippa's weird and suggestive songs, coming, as if by accident, upon their hearing at the critical moment. With certain reservations this is a strong and delicate conception, admirably worked out. The usual fault is present: the characters, whether students, peasants, or soldiers, all talk like sages; Pippa reasons like a Paracelsus in pantalets, — her intellectual songs are strangely put in the mouth of an ignorant silk-winding girl; Phene is more natural, though mature, even for Italy, at fourteen. Browning's children are old as himself; — he rarely sees them objectively. Even in the songs he is awkward, void of lyric grace; if they have the wilding flavor, they have more than need be of specks and gnarledness. In the epilogue Pippa seeks her garret, and, as she disrobes, after artlessly running over the events of her holiday, soliloquizes thus: —

Too intellectual.

"Now, one thing I should like really to know:
How near I ever might approach all these
I only fancied being, this long day —
— Approach, I mean, so as to touch them — so
As to . . in some way . . move them — if you please,
Do good or evil to them some slight way."

Finally, she sleeps, — unconscious of her day's mis-

sion, — and of the fact that her own life is to be something more than it has been, — but not until she has murmured these words of a hymn: —

> "All service is the same with God, —
> With God, whose puppets, best and worst,
> Are we: there is no last nor first."

A rare and exquisite production.

"Pippa Passes" is a work of pure art, and has a wealth of original fancy and romance, apart from its wisdom, to which every poet will do justice. Its faults are those of style and undue intellectuality. To quote the author's words, in another drama,

> "Ah? well! he o'er-refines, — the scholar's fault!"

As it is, we accept his work, looking upon it as upon some treasured yet *bizarre* painting of the mixed school, whose beauties are the more striking for its defects. The former are inherent, the latter external and subordinate.

"A Soul's Tragedy."

Everything from this poet is, or used to be, of value and interest, and "A Soul's Tragedy" is of both: first, for a masterly distinction between the action of sentiment and that founded on principle, and, secondly, for wit, satire, and knowledge of affairs. Ogniben, the Legate, is the most thorough man of the world Browning has drawn. That is a matchless stroke, at the close, where he says: "I have seen four-and-twenty leaders of revolts." It is a consolation to recall this when a pretender arises; his race is measured, — his fall will surely come.

With "Luria," in 1845–6, Browning, whose plays had been briefly performed, and whose closet-dramas had found too small a reading, made his "last attempt, for the present, at dramatic poetry." It

remains to examine his miscellaneous after-work, including the long poems which have appeared within the last five years, — thus far the most prolific, if not the most creative, period of his untiring life.

V.

Dramatic nature of Browning's lyrics.

SOMETHING of a dramatic character pertains to nearly all of Browning's lyrics. Like his wife, he has preferred to study human hearts rather than the forms of nature. A note to the first collection of his briefer poems places them under the head of Dramatic Pieces. This was at a time when English poets were enslaved to the idyllic method, and forgot that their readers had passions most suggestive to art when exalted above the tranquillity of picturesque repose. Herein Browning justly may claim originality. Even the Laureate combined the art of Keats with the contemplative habit of Wordsworth, and adapted them to his own times; while Browning was the prophet of that reaction which holds that the proper study of mankind is man. His effort, weak or able, was at figure-painting, in distinction from that of landscape or still-life. It has not flourished during the recent period, but we are indebted to him for what we have of it. In an adverse time it was natural for it to assume peculiar, almost morbid phases; but of this struggling, turbid figure-school, — variously represented by the younger Lytton, Rossetti, Swinburne, and others, he was the long-neglected progenitor. His genius may have been unequal to his aims. It is not easy for him to combine a score of figures upon the ample canvas: his work is at its best in separate ideals, or, rather, in portraits, — his

Founder of the new life-school.

dramatic talent being more realistic than imaginative. Still, portraiture, in a certain sense, is the highest form of painting, and Browning's personal studies must not be undervalued. As usual, even here he is unequal, and, while some of them are matchless, in others, like all men of genius who aim at the highest, he conspicuously fails. A man of talent may never fail, yet never rise above a fixed height. Yet if Browning were a man of great genius his failures would not so outnumber his successes that half his lyrics could be missed without injury to his reputation.

The shorter pieces, "Dramatic Romances and Lyrics," in the first general collection of his works, are of a better average grade than those in his latest book of miscellanies. One of the best is "My Last Duchess," a masterly sketch, comprising within sixty lines enough matter to furnish Browning, nowadays, with an excuse for a quarto. Nothing can be subtler than the art whereby the Duke is made to reveal a cruel tragedy of which he was the relentless villain, to betray the blackness of his heart, and to suggest a companion-tragedy in his betrothal close at hand. Thus was introduced a new method, applied with such coolness as to suggest the idea of vivisection or morbid anatomy.

"My Last Duchess."

But let us group other lyrics in this collection with the matter of two later volumes, *Men and Women*, and *Dramatis Personæ*. These books, made up of isolated poems, contain the bulk of his work during the eighteen years which followed his marriage in 1846. While their contents include no long poem or drama, they seem, upon the whole, to be the fullest expression of his genius, and that for which he is

"Men and Women," 1855.

"Dramatis Personæ," 1864.

likeliest to be remembered. Every poet has limitations, and in such briefer studies Browning keeps within the narrowest bounds allotted to him. Very few of his best pieces are in "Dramatis Personæ," the greater part of which book is made up of his most ragged, uncouth, and even puerile verse; and it is curious that it appeared at a time when his wife was scribbling the rhetorical verse of those years which I have designated as her period of decline. But observe the general excellence of the fifty poems in "Men and Women,"—collected nine years earlier, when the author was forty-three years old, and at his prime. In the chapter upon Tennyson it was stated that almost every poet has a representative book, showing him at full height and variety. "Men and Women," like the Laureate's volume of 1842, is the most finished and comprehensive of the author's works, and the one his readers least could spare. Here we find numbers of those thrilling, skilfully dramatic studies, which so many have imitated without catching the secret of their power.

Inferiority of the last-named volume.

"Men and Women" a representative work.

The general effect of Browning's miscellaneous poems is like that of a picture-gallery, where cabinet-paintings, by old and modern masters, are placed at random upon the walls. Some are rich in color; others, strong in light and shade. A few are elaborately finished,—more are careless drawings, fresh, but hurriedly sketched in. Often the subjects are repulsive, but occasionally we have the solitary, impressive figure of a lover or a saint.

"Andrea del Sarto."

The poet is as familiar with mediæval thought and story as most authors with their own time, and adapts them to his lyrical uses. "Andrea del Sarto" belongs to the same group with "My Last Duchess."

It is the language of "the faultless painter," addressed to his beautiful and thoughtless wife, for whom he has lowered his ideal — and from whose chains he cannot break, though he knows she is unworthy, and even false to him. He moans before one of Rafael's drawings, excusing the faults, in envy of the genius: —

> "Still, what an arm! and I could alter it.
> But all the play, the insight and the stretch —
> Out of me! out of me! And wherefore out?
> Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
> We might have risen to Rafael, I and you.
> . . . . .
> But had you — O, with the same perfect brow,
> And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
> And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
> The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare, —
> Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
> Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
> 'God and the glory! never care for gain!'
> . . . . .
> I might have done it for you."

Were it indeed "all for love," then were the "world well lost"; but even while he dallies with his wife she listens for her gallant's signal. This poem is one of Browning's finest studies: of late he has given us nothing equal to it. The picture of the rollicking "Fra Lippo Lippi" is broad, free-handed, yet scarcely so well done. "Pictor Ignotus" is upon another art-theme, and in quiet beauty differs from the poet's usual manner. Other old-time studies, good and poor, which served to set the fashion for a number of minor poets, are such pieces as "Count Gismond," "Cristina," "The Laboratory," and "The Confessional."

"Fra Lippo Lippi," etc.

"Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day," 1850.

How perilous an easy rhymed-metre is to this author was discernible in "Sordello." After the same manner he is tempted to garrulity in the semi-religious poems, "Christmas Eve" and "Easter Day." It is difficult otherwise to account for their dreary flow, since they are no more original in theology than poetical in language and design.

Excellent mediæval church studies.

It would be strange if Browning were not indebted, for some of his most powerful themes, to the superstition from which mediæval art, politics, and daily life took their prevailing tone. In his analysis of its quality he seems to me extremely profound. Monasticism in Spain even now is not so different from that of the fifteenth century, and the repulsive imagery of a piece like the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," written in the harshest verse, well consorts with a period when the orders, that took their origin in exalted purity, had become degraded through lust, gluttony, jealousy, and every cardinal sin. Browning draws his monks, as Doré in the illustrations to "Les Contes Drôlatiques," with porcine or wolfish faces, monstrous, seamed with vice, defiled in body and soul. "The Bishop orders his Tomb" has been criticised as not being a faithful study of the Romish ecclesiastic, A. D. 15—; but, unless I misapprehend the spirit of that period, this is one of the poet's strongest portraitures. Religion then was often a compound of fear, bigotry, and greed; its officers, trained in the Church, seemed to themselves invested with something greater than themselves; their ideas of good and evil, after years of ritualistic service, — made gross with pelf, jealousy, sensualism, and even blood-guiltiness, — became strangely intermixed. The poet overlays this groundwork with that love of art

and luxury — of jasper, peach-blossom marble, and lazuli — inbred in every Italian, — and even with the scholar's desire to have his epitaph carved aright: —

> "Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
> No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line, —
> Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!
> And then how I shall lie through centuries,
> And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
> And see God made and eaten all day long,
> And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
> Good, strong, thick, stupefying incense-smoke!"

All this commanded to his bastards! And for the rest, were ever suspicion, hatred, delight at outwitting a rival in love and preferment, and every other loathsome passion strong in death, more ruthlessly and truthfully depicted?

"The Heretic's Tragedy," etc.

Of strictly mediæval church studies, "The Heretic's Tragedy" and "Holy-Cross Day," with their grotesque diction, annotations, and prefixes, are the most skilful reproductions essayed in our time. Browning alone could have conceived or written them. In "A Grammarian's Funeral," "Abt Vogler," and "Master Hugues," early scholarship and music are commemorated. The language of the simplest of these is so intricate that we have to be educated in a new tongue to comprehend them. Their value lies in the human nature revealed under such fantastic, and, to us, unnatural aspects developed in other times.

Studies upon themes taken from the first century.

"Artemis Prologuizes," the poet's antique sketch, is as unclassical as one might expect from its affected title. "Saul," a finer poem, may have furnished hints to Swinburne with respect to anapestic verse and the Hebraic feeling. Three poems, which strive to reproduce the early likeness and spirit of Christianity,

merit close attention. One describes the raising of Lazarus, narrated in an "Epistle of Karshish, the Arab Physician." The pious, learned mage sees in the miracle

> "but a case of mania — subinduced
> By epilepsy, at the turning-point
> Of trance prolonged unduly some three days."

"Cleon."

"Cleon" is an exposition of the highest ground reached by the Pagan philosophy, set forth in a letter written, by a wise poet, to Protos, the King. At the end he makes light of the preachings of Paul, who is welcome to the few proselytes he can make among the ignorant slaves: —

> "And (as I gathered from a bystander)
> Their doctrines could be held by no sane man."

The reader is forced to stop and consider what despised doctrines even now may be afloat, which in time may constitute the whole world's creed. The most elaborate of these pieces is "A Death in the Desert," the last words of St. John, the Evangelist, recorded by Pamphylax, an Antiochene martyr. The prologue and epilogue are sufficiently pedantic, but, like the long-drawn narrative, so characteristic, that this curious production may be taken as a representative poem. A similar bit of realism is the sketch of a great poet, seen in every-day life by a fellow-townsman, entitled, "How it Strikes a Contemporary." And now, having selected a few of these miscellaneous pieces to represent the mass, how shall we define their true value, and their influence upon recent art?

"A Death in the Desert."

Browning is justified in offering such works as a substitute for poetic treatment of English themes,

since he is upon ground naturally his own. Yet as *poems* they fail to move us, and to elevate gloriously the soul, but are the outgrowth of minute realism and speculation. To quote from one who is reviewing a kindred sort of literature, they sin "against the spirit of antiquity, in carrying back the modern analytic feeling to a scene where it does not belong." It is owing precisely to this sin that several of Browning's longer works are literary and rhythmical prodigies, monuments of learning and labor rather than ennobling efforts of the imagination. His hand is burdened by too great accumulation of details, — and then there is the ever-present spirit of Robert Browning peering from the eyes of each likeness, however faithful, that he portrays.

Defect of the foregoing poems.

He is the most intellectual of poets, Tennyson not excepted. Take, for example, "Caliban," with its text, "Thou thoughtest I was altogether such an one as thyself." The motive is a study of anthropomorphism, by reflection of its counterpart in a lower animal, half man, half beast, possessed of the faculty of speech. The "natural theology" is food for thought; the poetry, descriptive and otherwise, realism carried to such perfection as to seem imagination. Here we have Browning's curious reasoning at its best. But what can be more vulgar and strictly unpoetical than "Mr. Sludge, the Medium," a composition of the same period? Our familiarity with such types as those to which the author's method is here applied enables us to test it with anything but satisfaction. Applied to a finer subject, in "Bishop Blougram's Apology," we heartily admire its virile analysis of the motives actuating the great prelate, who after due reflection has rejected

Browning's subtilty of intellect.

"Caliban."

"Mr. Sludge."

"Bishop Blougram."

"A life of doubt diversified by faith
For one of faith diversified by doubt."

Cardinal Wiseman is worldly and insincere; the poet, Gigadibs, is earnest and on the right side; yet, somehow, we do not quite despise the churchman nor admire the poet. This piece is at once the foremost defence and arraignment of Philistinism, drawn up by a thinker broad enough to comprehend both sides. As an intellectual work, it is meat and wine; as a poem, as a thing of beauty, — but that is quite another point in issue.

Occasional lyrics:

Browning's offhand, occasional lyrics, such as "Waring," "Time's Revenges," "Up in a Villa," "The Italian in England," "By the Fireside," "The Worst of It," etc., are suggestive, and some of them widely familiar. His style has been caught by others. The picturesqueness and easy rhythm of "The Flight of the Duchess," and the touches in briefer lyrics, are repeated by minnesingers like Owen Meredith and Dobell. There is a grace and turn that still evades them, for sometimes their master can be as sweet and tuneful as Lodge, or any other of the skylarks. Witness "In a Gondola," that delicious Venetian cantata, full of music and sweet sorrow, or "One Way of Love," for example, — but such melodies are none too frequent. When he paints nature, as in "Home Thoughts, from Abroad," how fresh and fine the landscape!

Their excellence and faults.

"And after April, when May follows,
And the white-throat builds, and all the swallows, —
Hark! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms, and dew-drops — at the bent spray's edge —
That 's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!"

Having in mind Shakespeare and Shelley, I nevertheless think the last three lines the finest ever written touching the song of a bird. Contrast therewith the poet's later method, — the prose-run-mad of stanzas such as this: —

> "Hobbs hints blue, — straight he turtle eats.
> Nobbs prints blue, — claret crowns his cup.
> Nokes outdares Stokes in azure feats, —
> Both gorge. Who fished the murex up?
> What porridge had John Keats?"

And this by no means the most impertinent of kindred verses in his books, — poetry that neither gods nor men can endure or understand, and yet interstrewn with delicate trifles, such as "Memorabilia," which for *suggestiveness* long will be preserved. Who so deft to catch the one immortal moment, the fleeting exquisite word? Who so wont to reach for it, and wholly fail?

VI.

Moral of his emotional verse.

We come, at last, to a class of Browning's poems that I have grouped for their expression of that dominating sentiment, to which reference was made at the beginning of this review. Their moral is that of the apothegm that "Attractions are proportional to destinies"; of rationalistic freedom, as opposed to Calvinism; of a belief that the greatest sin does not consist in giving rein to our desires, but in stinting or too prudently repressing them. Life must have its full and free development. And, as love is the master-passion, he is most earnest in illustrating this belief from its good or evil progress, and to this end has composed his most impressive verse.

A main lesson of Browning's emotional poetry is that the unpardonable sin is "to dare something against nature." To set bounds to love is to commit that sin. Through his instinct for conditions which engender the most dramatic forms of speech and action, he is, at least, as an artist, tolerant of what is called an intrigue; and that many complacent English and American readers do not recognize this, speaks volumes either for their stupidity, or for their hypocrisy and inward sympathy in a creed which they profess to abhor. Affecting to comprehend and admire Browning, they still refuse to forgive Swinburne, — whose crude earlier poems brought the lust of the flesh to the edge of a grossness too palpable to be seductive, and from which his riper manhood has departed altogether. The elder poet, from first to last, has appeared to defend the elective affinities against impediments of law, theology, or social rank. It is not my province to discuss the ethics of this matter, but simply to speak of it as a fact.

Its subjective undertone.

It will not do to fall back upon Browning's protest, in the note to his "Dramatic Lyrics," that these are "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons," and not his own. For when he returns persistently to a certain theme, illustrates it in divers ways, and heaps the coals of genius upon it till it breaks out into flame, he ceases to be objective and reveals his secret thought. No matter how conservative his habit, he is to be judged, like any artist, by his work; and in all his poems we see a taste for the joys and sorrows of a free, irresponsible life, — like that of the Italian lovers, of students in their vagrant youth, or of Consuelo and her husband upon the windy heath. Above all, he tells us: —

"Thou shalt know, those arms once curled
About thee, what we knew before,
How love is the only good in the world."

"In a Balcony" is the longest and finest of his emotional poems: a dramatic episode, in three dialogues, the personages of which talk at too great length, — although, no doubt, many and varied thoughts flash through the mind at supreme moments, and it is Browning's custom to put them all upon the record. How clearly the story is wrought! What exquisite language, and passion triumphant over life and death! Mark the transformation of the lonely queen, in the one radiant hour of her life that tells her she is beloved, and makes her an angel of goodness and light. She barters power and pride for love, clutching at this one thing as at Heaven, and feels

"In a Balcony."

"How soon a smile of God can change the world."

Then comes the transformation, upon discovery of the cruel deceit, — her vengeance and despair. The love of Constance, who for it will surrender life, and even Norbert's hand, is more unselfish; never more subtly, perhaps, than in this poem, has been illustrated Byron's epigram: —

"In her first passion, woman loves her lover:
In all the others, all she loves is love."

Here, too, is the profound lesson of the whole, that a word of the man Norbert's simple, blundering truth would have prevented all this coil. But the poet is at his height in treating of the master passion: —

"Remember, I (and what am I to you?)
Would give up all for one, leave throne, lose life,
Do all but just unlove him! he loves me."

With fine abandonment he makes the real worth so much more than the ideal: —

> "We live, and they experiment on life,
> These poets, painters, all who stand aloof
> To overlook the farther. Let us be
> The thing they look at!"

But in a large variety of minor lyrics it is hinted that our instincts have something divine about them; that, regardless of other obligations, we may not disobey the inward monition. A man not only may forsake father and mother and cleave to his wife; but forsake his wife and cleave to the predestined one. No sin like repression; no sting like regret; no requital for the opportunity slighted and gone by. In "The Statue and the Bust," — a typical piece, — had the man and woman seen clearly "the end" of life, though "a crime," they had not so failed of it: —

"The Statue and the Bust."

> "If you choose to play — is my principle!
> Let a man contend to the uttermost
> For his life's set prize, be it what it will!
>
> "The counter our lovers staked was lost
> As surely as if it were lawful coin:
> And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
>
> "Was, the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin.
> Though the end in sight was a crime, I say."

"A Light Woman" turns upon the right of every soul, however despicable, to its own happiness, and to freedom from the meddling of others. The words of many lyrics, attesting the boundless liberty and sovereignty of love, are plainly written, and to say the lesson is not there is to ape those commentators

who discover an allegorical meaning in each Scriptural text that interferes with their special creeds.

Wedded poets.

Both Browning and his wife possessed by nature a radical gift for sifting things to the core, an heroic disregard of every conventional gloss or institution. They were thoroughly mated in this respect, though one may have outstripped the other in exercise of the faculty. Their union, apparently, was so absolute that neither felt any need of fuller emotional life. The sentiment of Browning's passional verse, therefore, is not the outgrowth of perceptions sharpened by restraint. The poetry addressed to his wife is, if anything, of a still higher order. He watches her

> "Reading by firelight, that great brow
> And the spirit-small hand propping it
> Mutely — my heart knows how —
>
> "When, if I think but deep enough,
> You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme";

and again and again addresses her in such lines as these: —

> "God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
> Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
> One to show a woman when he loves her.
> . . . . . .
> This to you — yourself my moon of poets!
> Ah, but that 's the world's side — there 's the wonder —
> Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you."

True passion ennobles art.

In fine, not only his passional lyrics, but all the poems relating to the wedded love in which his own deepest instincts were thoroughly gratified, are the most strong and simple portion of his verse, — showing that luminous expression is still the product of high emotion, as some conceive the diamond to have been crystallized by the electric shock.

VII.

"Dramatis Personæ."

MANY of the lyrics in the volume of 1864 are so thin and faulty, and so fail to carry out the author's intent, — the one great failure in art, — as sadly to illustrate the progressive ills which attend upon a wrong method.

"The Ring and the Book," 1869.

The gift still remained, however, for no work displays more of ill-diffused power and swift application than Browning's longest poem, *The Ring and the Book.* It has been succeeded rapidly, within five years, by other works, — the whole almost equalling, in bulk, the entire volume of his former writings. Their special quality is affluence: limitless wealth of language and illustration. They abound in the material of poetry. A poet should condense from such star-dust the orbs which give light and outlast time. As in "Sordello," Browning again fails to do this; he gives us his first draught, — the huge, outlined block, yet to be reduced to fit proportions, — the painter's sketch, blotchy and too obscure, and of late without the early freshness.

An intellectual marvel.

Nevertheless, "The Ring and the Book" is a wonderful production, the extreme of realistic art, and considered, not without reason, by the poet's admirers, to be his greatest work. To review it would require a special chapter, and I have said enough with respect to the author's style in my citation of his less extended poems; but as the product of sheer intellect this surpasses them all. It is the story of a tragedy which took place at Rome one hundred and seventy years ago. The poet seems to have found his thesis in an old book, — part print, part manuscript, — bought for eight pence at a Florence stall: —

"A book in shape, but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since."

Outline of the poem.

The versified narrative of the child Pampilia's sale to Count Guido, of his cruelty and violence, of her rescue by a young priest, — the pursuit, the lawful separation, the murder by Guido of the girl and her putative parents, the trial and condemnation of the murderer, and the affirmation of his sentence by the Pope, — all this is made to fill out a poem of twenty-one thousand lines; but these include ten different versions of the same tale, besides the poet's prelude, — in which latter he gives a general outline of it, so that the reader plainly may understand it, and the historian then be privileged to wander as he choose.

The chapters which contain the statements of the priest-lover and Pampilia are full of tragic beauty and emotion; the Pope's soliloquy, though too prolonged, is a wonderful piece of literary metempsychosis; but the speeches of the opposing lawyers carry realism to an intolerable, prosaic extreme. Each of these books, possibly, should be read by itself, and not too steadily nor too often. Observe that the author, in elevated passages, sometimes forgets his usual manner and breaks into the cadences of Tennyson's style; for instance, the apostrophe to his dead wife, beginning

The style of certain passages.

"O lyric Love, half angel and half bird,
And all a wonder and a wild desire!"

But elsewhere he still leads the reaction from the art-school. His presentations are endless: in his architecture the tracery, scroll-work, and multifoil bewilder us and divert attention from the main design. Yet in presence of the changeful flow of his verse,

and the facility wherewith he records the speculations of his various characters, we are struck with wonder. "The Ring and the Book" is thus far imaginative, and a rhythmical marvel, but is it a stronghold of poetic art? As a whole, we cannot admit that it is; and yet the thought, the vocabulary, the imagery, the wisdom, lavished upon this story, would equip a score of ordinary writers, and place them beyond danger of neglect.

"*Balaustion's Adventure*," 1871.

Balaustion's Adventure, the poet's next volume, displays a tranquil beauty uncommon in his verse, and it seems as if he sought, after his most prolonged effort, to refresh his mind with the sweetness and repose of Greek art. He treads decently and reverently in the buskins of Euripides, and forgets to be garrulous in his chaste semi-translation of the Alcestis. The girl Balaustion's prelude and conclusion are very neatly turned, reminding us of Landor; nor does the book, as a whole, lack the antique flavor and the blue, laughing freshness of the Trinacrian sea.

"*Fifine at the Fair*," 1872.

What shall be said of *Fifine at the Fair*, or of that volume, the last but one of Browning's essays, which not long ago succeeded it? Certainly, that they exhibit his steadfast tendency to produce work that is less and less poetical. There is no harder reading than the first of these poems; no more badly chosen, rudely handled measure than the verse selected for it; no pretentious work, from so great a pen, has less of the spirit of grace and comeliness. It is a pity that the author has not somewhat accustomed himself to write in prose, for he insists upon recording all of his thoughts, and many of them are essentially prosaic. Strength and subtilty are not enough in art: beauty, either of the fair, the terrible, or the gro-

tesque, is its justification, and a poem that repels at the outset has small excuse for being. "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Savior of Society," is another of Browning's experiments in vivisection, the subject readily made out to be the late Emperor of the French. It is longer than "Bishop Blougram's Apology," but compare it therewith, and we are forced to perceive a decline in terseness, virility, and true imaginative power.

"Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau."

Red Cotton Night-Cap Country; or, Turf and Towers, — what exasperating titles Browning puts forth! this time under the protection of Miss Thackeray. That the habit is inbred, however, is proved by some absurd invention whenever it becomes necessary to coin a proper name. After "Bluphocks" and "Gigadibs," we have no right to complain of the title of his Breton romance. The poem itself contains a melodramatic story, and hence is less uninteresting than "Fifine." But to have such a volume, after Browning's finer works, come out with each revolving year, is enough to extort from his truest admirers the cry of "Words! Words! Words!" Much of the detail is paltry, and altogether local or temporal, so that it will become inexplicable fifty years hence. There is a constant "dropping into" prose; moreover, whole pages of wandering nonsense are called forth by some word, like "night-cap" or "fiddle," taken for a text, as if to show the poet's mastery of verse-building and how contemptible he can make it. Once he would have put the narrative of this poem into a brief dramatic sketch that would have had beauty and interest. "My Last Duchess" is a more genuine addition to literature than the two hundred pages of this tedious and affected romance. A pro-

"Red Cotton Night-Cap Country," 1873.

Decline in poetic value.

longed career has not been of advantage to the reputation of Browning: his tree was well-rooted and reached a sturdy growth, but the yield is too profuse, of a fruit that still grows sourer from year to year.

Nevertheless, this poet, like all men of genius, has happy seasons in which, by some remarkable performance, he seems to renew his prime. *Aristophanes' Apology* continues the charm of "Balaustion's Adventure," to which poem it is a sequel. What I have said of the classical purity and sweetness of the earlier production will apply to portions of "the last adventure of Balaustion," — which also includes "a transcript from Euripides." Besides, it displays the richness of scholarship, command of learned details, skill in sophistry and analysis, power to recall, awaken, and dramatically inform the historic past, in all which qualifications this master still remains unequalled by any modern writer, even by the most gifted and affluent pupil of his own impressive school.

"Aristophanes' Apology," 1875.

VIII.

Final estimate of this poet.

A FAIR estimate of Browning may, I think, be deduced from the foregoing review of his career. It is hard to speak of one whose verse is a metrical paradox. I have called him the most original and the most unequal of living poets; he continually descends to a prosaic level, but at times is elevated to the Laureate's highest flights. Without realizing the proper functions of art, he nevertheless sympathizes with the joyous liberty of its devotees; his life may be conventional, but he never forgets the Latin Quarter, and often celebrates that freedom in love and song which is the soul of Béranger's

Most original and unequal.

"Dans un grenier qu'on est bien à vingt ans."

A true fellow-craftsman.

Then, too, what working man of letters does not thank him when he says, —

> "But you are of the trade, my Puccio!
> You have the fellow-craftsman's sympathy.
> There 's none knows like a fellow of the craft
> The all unestimated sum of pains
> That go to a success the world can see."

Rich, yet barbaric taste.

He is an eclectic, and will not be restricted in his themes; on the other hand, he gives us too gross a mixture of poetry, fact, and metaphysics, appearing to have no sense of composite harmony, but to revel in arabesque strangeness and confusion. He has a barbaric sense of color and lack of form. Striving against the trammels of verse, he really is far less a master of expression than others who make less resistance. We read in "Pippa Passes": "If there should arise a new painter, will it not be in some such way by a poet, now, or a musician (spirits who have conceived and perfected an Ideal through some other channel), transferring it to this, and escaping our conventional roads by pure ignorance of them?" This is the Pre-Raphaelite idea, and, so far, good; but Browning's fault is that, if he has "conceived," he certainly has made no effort to "perfect" an Ideal.

The limits of freedom in art:

Their beneficent reaction upon the artist's work.

And here I wish to say, — and this is something which, soon or late, every thoughtful poet must discover, — that the structural exigencies of art, if one adapts his genius to them, have a beneficent reaction upon the artist's original design. By some friendly law they help the work to higher excellence, suggesting unthought-of touches, and refracting, so to speak, the single beam of light in rays of varied and delightful beauty.

Ultimate results of lawlessness.

The brakes which art applies to the poet's movement not only regulate, but strengthen its progress. Their absence is painfully evinced by the mass of Browning's unread verse. Works like "Sordello" and "Fifine," however intellectual, seem, like the removal of the Malvern Hills, a melancholy waste of human power. When some romance like the last-named comes from his pen, — an addition in volume, not in quality, to what he has done before, — I feel a sadness like that engendered among hundreds of gloomy folios in some black-letter alcove: books, forever closed, over which the mighty monks of old wore out their lives, debating minute points of casuistic theology, though now the very memory of their discussions has passed away. Would that Browning might take to heart his own words, addressed, in "Transcendentalism," to a brother-poet: —

> "Song's our art:
> Whereas you please to speak these naked thoughts
> Instead of draping them in sights and sounds.
> — True thoughts, good thoughts, thoughts fit to treasure up!
> But why such long prolusion and display,
> Such turning and adjustment of the harp?
> . . . . .
> But here's your fault; grown men want thought, you think;
> Thought's what they mean by verse, and seek in verse:
> Boys seek for images and melody,
> Men must have reason, — so you aim at men.
> Quite otherwise!"

Browning's minute dramatic insight.

Incidentally we have noted the distinction between the drama of Browning and that of the absolute kind, observing that his characters reflect his own mental traits, and that their action and emotion are of small moment compared with the speculations to which he makes them all give voice. Still, he has

dramatic insight, and a minute power of reading other men's hearts. His moral sentiment has a potent and subtile quality: — through his early poems he really founded a school, and had imitators, and, although of his later method there are few, the younger poets whom he has most affected very naturally began work by carrying his philosophy to a startling yet perfectly logical extreme.

The "poetry of the future."

Much of his poetry is either very great or very poor. It has been compared to Wagner's music, and entitled the "poetry of the future"; but if this be just, then we must revise our conception of what poetry really is. The doubter incurs the contemptuous enmity of two classes of the dramatist's admirers: first, of the metaphysical, who disregard considerations of passion, melody, and form; secondly, of those who are sensitive to their master's failings, but, in view of his greatness, make it a point of honor to defend them. That greatness lies in his originality; his error, arising from perverseness or congenital defect, is the violation of natural and beautiful laws. This renders his longer poems of less worth than his lyrical studies, while, through avoidance of it, productions, differing as widely as "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "In Memoriam," will outlive "The Ring and the Book." In writing of Arnold I cited his own quotation of Goethe's distinction between the dilettanti, who affect genius and despise art, and those who respect their calling though not gifted with high creative power. Browning escapes the limitations of the latter class, but incurs the reproach visited upon the former; and by his contempt of beauty, or inability to surely express it, fails of that union of art and spiritual power which always characterizes a poet "entirely great."

What constitutes true greatness in art.

CHAPTER X.

LATTER-DAY SINGERS.

ROBERT BUCHANAN. — DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI. — WILLIAM MORRIS.

I.

A new departure.

THROUGHOUT the recent poetry of Great Britain a new departure is indicated, and there are signs that the true Victorian era has nearly reached a close. To speak more fully, we approach the end of that time in which — although a composite school has derived its models from all preceding forms — the idyllic method, as represented by Tennyson, upon the whole has prevailed, and has been more successful than in earlier times, and than contemporary efforts in the higher scale of song.

All periods are transitional; yet it may be said that the calling of the British poets, during the last fifteen years, has been a "struggle," not so much for recognition, as for the vital influence which constitutes a genuine "existence." The latter-day singers, who bear a special relation to the immediate future, are like those priests of the Sun, who, on hills overlooking the temples of strange gods, and above the tumult of a hostile nation, tend the sacred fire, in presence of their band of devotees, and wait for the coming of a fairer day. Not that the blood of Eng-

The latter-day poets.

lishmen is more frigid, and their wants more sordid, than of old. The time is sufficiently imaginative. Love of excitement, the most persistent of human motives, is strong as ever. But the sources are various which now supply to the imagination that stimulus for which the new generation otherwise might resort to poetry. It is an age of journalism; all the acts of all the world are narrated by the daily press. It is, we have seen, a time of criticism and scholarship, similar to the Alexandrian period of Greek thought. It is the very noontide of imaginative work in prose; and so largely have great novelists supplanted the poets in general regard, that annalists designate the Victorian period as the "age of prose romance." Finally, and notably within the last decade, readers have been confronted with those wonders of science which have a double effect, — destroying the old poetic diction and imagery, and elevating the soul with beauty and sublimity beyond anything proffered by verse of the idyllic kind. The poets — especially Tennyson, in his recognition of modern science and the new theology — have tried to meet the exigency, but their efforts have been timid and hardly successful. Their art, though noble and refined, rarely has swayed the multitude, or even led the literary progress of the time, — that which verse was wont to do in the great poetic epochs. Year by year these adverse conditions have been more severely felt. To the latest poets, I say, the situation is so oppressive that there is reason to believe it must be near an end, and hence we see them striving to break through and out of the restrictions that surround them.

Their embarrassments.

Cf. "Poets of America": p. 437.

Where is the point of exit? This is the problem

Remedial efforts.

which, singly or in groups, they are trying, perhaps unconsciously, to solve. Some return to a purely natural method, applying it to scenes whose freshness and simplicity may win attention; others withdraw to the region of absolute art, and by new and studied forms of constructive beauty gratify their own taste, and at least secure a delight in labor which, of itself, is full compensation. Some have applied poetic investigation to the spiritual themes which float like shadows among the pillars and arches of recent materialism; finally, all are agreed in attempting to infuse with more dramatic passion the over-cultured method of the day.

Need of a dramatic revival. Cp. "Poets of America": pp. 466–469.

In this last endeavor I am sure their instinct is right. Modern art has carried restraint and breeding below the level of repose. Poetry, to recover its station, must shake off its luxurious sleep: the Philistines are upon it. It must stimulate feeling, arouse to life, love, and action, before there can be a true revival of its ancient power.

It would be invidious to lay any stress upon the fact that the body of recent English verse is supplied by those smaller lyrists, who, the poet tells us, never weary of singing the old eternal song. Socialists avow that Nature is unerring in the distribution of her groups. Among a thousand men are so many natural farmers, so many mechanics, a number of scholars, two or three musicians, — a single philanthropist, it may be. But we search groups of a hundred thousand for a tolerable poet, and of a million for a good one. The inspired are in the proportion of diamonds to amethysts, of gold to iron. If, in the generation younger than Tennyson and the Brownings, we discover three or four singers fit to aspire

and lead the way, especially at this stage of competition with science and prose romance, there surely is no need that we should wholly despair.

I have spoken elsewhere of the minor poets, and of those specialists who excel in dialect-writing and society-verse, and have derived from their miscellaneous productions an idea of the tone and fashion of the period. As we seek for those who are distinguished, not only by power and individuality, but by the importance of their accomplished work, three or four, at most, require specific attention. Another year, and the position may be changed; for poets are like comets in the suddenness of their appearance, and too often also in brief glory, hyperbolic orbit, and abrupt departure to be seen no more.

Representative names.

Of the four whose names most readily occur to the mind, — Buchanan, Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne, — the first holds an isolated position; the remaining three, though their gifts are entirely distinctive, have an appearance of association through sympathy in taste or studies, — so that, while to classify them as a school might be unphilosophical, to think of one is to recall the others. Such a group is not without precedent. It is not for this cause that I include the three under one review; if it were so, Buchanan, from his antagonistic position, well might be placed elsewhere. The fact is, that all are latter-day poets, and need not object to meet on the footing of guests in the house of a common friend. With the exception of Rossetti, these later poets are alike in at least one respect: they are distinguished from the Farringford school by a less condensed, more affluent order of work, — are prodigal of their verse, pouring it out in youth, and flooding the ear with rhythm. There is

no nursing of couplets, and so fruitful a yield may be taken as the evidence of a rich and fertile soil.

II.

Robert Buchanan: born in Scotland, Aug. 18, 1841.

JUDGED either by his verse or by his critical writings, Robert Buchanan seems to have a highly developed poetic temperament, with great earnestness, strength of conviction, and sensitiveness to points of right and wrong. Upon the whole, he represents, possibly more than any other rising man, the Scottish element in literature,—an element that stubbornly retains its characteristics, just as Scotch blood manages to hold its own through many changes of emigration, intermarriage, or long descent. The most prosaic Scotsman has something of the imagination and warmth of feeling that belong to a poet; the Scottish minstrel has the latter quality, at least, to an extent beyond ordinary comprehension. He wears his heart upon his sleeve; his naïveté and self-consciousness subject him to charges of egotism; he has strong friends, but makes as many enemies by tilting against other people's convictions, and by zealous advocacy of his own.

His temperament.

It is difficult for such a man to confine himself to pure art, and Buchanan is no exception to the rule. He is a Scotsman all over, and not only in push and aggressiveness, but, let me add, in versatility, in genuine love and knowledge of nature, and in his religious aspiration. The latter does not manifest itself through allegiance to any traditional belief, but through a spirit of individual inquiry, resulting in speculations which he advances with all the fervor of Knox or Chalmers, and thus furnishes another illustration of the saying that every Scot has a creed of his own.

Great Britain can well afford to tolerate the metaphysics of Scotland for the sake of her poetry. Buchanan's transcendentalism is mentioned here, because he has made his verse its exponent, and thus, in his chosen quest after the knowledge of good and evil, has placed himself apart from the other poets of his time.

His writings.

The library edition of his writings, recently issued, does not exhibit accurately the progress of his growth. The poems are not arranged in the order of their composition, but upon a system adapted to the author's taste. In their perusal this is not the only feature to remind us of Wordsworth, whose arbitrary classification of his works is familiar to all. Both the early and the later writings of Buchanan show that much of his tutelage came from a youthful study of the bard of Rydal Mount, and he thus took a bent in a direction quite separate from that of the modern art-school. What he gained in freedom he lost in reserve, acquiring Wordsworth's gravest fault, — the habit of versifying every thought that comes to mind. A useful mission of the art-school has been to correct this tendency. Like Wordsworth, also, Buchanan is a natural sonneteer and idyllist, and he resembles the whole Lake school in the Orphic utterance of his opinions upon half the questions that fill the air. Hence some notable mistakes and beliefs, subject to revision; hence, also, ill-conceived and spasmodic work, like the "Napoleon Fallen" and "The Drama of Kings," of which I believe that only a select portion has been retained in a new edition of this author's works.

Influence of Wordsworth and the Lake school.

An isolated position.

Thus Robert Buchanan is one of the least restrained and most unequal of the younger poets; yet he is to be placed by himself on the ground of his decided

purpose and originality. What he lacks is the faculty of restraint. Stimulated, it may be, by his quick success, he has printed a great quantity of verse since the day, fourteen years ago, when David Gray and himself first started for London. That portion which is most carefully finished is, also, the freshest and most original; showing either that in his case the *labor limæ* is not thrown away, or else that, if the ruggedness of certain pieces is its result, he should have left them as they came from his brain. Of course his early efforts were experiments in verse rather than new and sweet pipings of his own. *Undertones* consisted chiefly of classical studies, — a kind of work, I should say, apart from his natural turn, and in which he was not very successful. We do not find the true classical spirit in "Pan," nor in "The Last Song of Apollo," good as both these pieces are in a certain way. "Polypheme's Passion," imitated from Euripides and Theocritus, is nearer the mark. The strength, precision, and beauty of the antique are what evade him. After Keats, Landor, Tennyson, and Arnold, his classicism is no real addition to work of this kind in English poetry.

"*Undertones*," 1860.

Five years later his Scottish idyls and legends showed the touch and feeling of the real poet. They introduced us to scenes and language before almost unstudied, and were affecting, truthful, and picturesque. His songs of Lowland superstition are light with fancy, and sometimes musical as the chiming of glass bells. The Inverburn tales, in rhymed-heroic and blank verse, were rightly named idyls. They are exquisite pictures of humble life, more full of dialogue and incident than Wordsworth's, broader in treatment than Tennyson's; in short, composed in

"*Idyls and Legends of Inverburn*," 1865.

their author's own style, and transcripts of the manners and landscape which he best knew. Few poems have more fairly deserved their welcome than "Willie Baird," "Poet Andrew," "John" ("The English Huswife's Gossip"), and "The Widow Mysie." Buchanan justly may be pronounced the most faithful poet of Nature among the new men. He is her familiar, and in this respect it would seem as if the mantle of Wordsworth had fallen to him from some fine sunset or misty height. He *knows* the country with that knowledge which is gained only in youth. Like an American poet, and like no British poet save himself, he knows the hills and valleys, the woods and rippling trout-streams. An artist is apt to underrate his special gift. Buchanan is said to place more value upon his town-poems; yet they do not affect us as these rural studies do, and the persons he best describes are those found in bucolic life. His four "Pastoral Pictures" rank with the pastorals of Bryant and Wordsworth in being so imaginative as to have the charm of more dramatic poems. "A Summer Pool" and "Up the River" are full of excellence. The following lines, taken almost at random, show what poetic beauty can be reached in purely descriptive verse: —

Fidelity to Nature.

Pastoral verse.

"The air is hotter here. The bee booms by
With honey-laden thigh,
Doubling the heat with sounds akin to heat;
And like a floating flower the butterfly
Swims upward, downward, till its feet
Cling to the hedge-rows white and sweet.
. . . . .
The sunlight fades on mossy rocks,
And on the mountain-sides the flocks
Are spilt like streams; — the highway dips
Down, narrowing to the path where lambs

Lay to the udders of their dams
  Their soft and pulpy lips.
The hills grow closer; to the right
The path sweeps round a shadowy bay,
Upon whose slated fringes white
And crested wavelets play.
All else is still. But list, O list!
Hidden by bowlders and by mist,
A shepherd whistles in his fist;
From height to height the far sheep bleat
In answering iteration sweet.
Sound, seeking Silence, bends above her,
Within some haunted mountain grot;
Kisses her, like a trembling lover,—
So that she stirs in sleep, but wakens not!"

As a writer of Scottish idyls, Buchanan was strictly within his limitations, and secure from rivalry. There is no dispute concerning a specialist, but a host will rebuke the claims of one who aims at universal success, and would fain, like the hard-handed man of Athens, play all parts at once. The young poet, however, having so well availed himself of these home-scenes, certainly had warrant for attempting other labors than those of a mere *genre* painter in verse. He took from the city various subjects for his maturer work, treating these and his North-coast pictures in a more realistic fashion, discarding adornment, and letting his art teach its lesson by fidelity to actual life. A series of the lighter city-poems, suggested by early experiences in town, and entitled "London Lyrics" in the edition of 1874, is not in any way remarkable. The lines "To the Luggie" are a more poetical tribute to his comrade, Gray, than is the lyric "To David in Heaven." For poems of a later date he made studies from the poor of London and it required some courage to set before his comfortable readers

"London Poems," 1866.

the wretchedness of the lowest classes, — to introduce their woful phantoms at the poetic feast. "Nell" and "Liz" have the unquestionable power of truth; they are faithfully, even painfully, realistic. The metre is purposely irregular, that nothing may cramp the language or blur the scene. "Nell" — the plaint of a creature whose husband has just been hanged for murder, and who, over the corpse of her still-born babe, tells the story of her misery and devotion — is stronger than its companion-piece; but each is the striking expression of a woman's anguish put in rugged and impressive verse. "Meg Blane," among the North-coast pieces, is Buchanan's longest example of a similar method applied to a rural theme. I do him no wrong by not quoting from any one of these productions, whose force lies in their general effect, and which are composed in a manner directly opposite to that of the elaborate modern school.

Their merits and defects.

As a presentment of something new and strong, these are remarkable poems. Nevertheless, and granting that propagandism is a legitimate mission of art, does not that poetry teach the most effectually which is the most attractive to a poet's audience? Have the great evangelists kept their hearers in an exalted state of anguish without frequent intermissions of relief? Hogarth, in his realistic pictures of low life, followed nature, and made their wretchedness endurable by seizing upon every humorous or grotesque point that could be made. "Nell," "Liz," and "Meg Blane" harrow us from first to last; there is no remission, — the poet is inexorable; the pain is continuous; we are willing to accept these lessons, but would be spared from others of the same cast.

Better as a poem, more tempting in its graphic

A beautiful idyl.

pictures of coast-life and brave sailorly forms, more pathetic as a narrative, and told in verse at once sturdier and more sweet, is that dramatic and beautiful idyl, "The Scairth o' 'Bartle," in which we find a union of naturalism and realism at their best. The lesson is just as impressive as that of "Meg Blane," and the verse—how tender and strong! I think that other poets, of the rhetorical sort, might have written the one, while Buchanan alone could have so rendered the Scottish-sailor dialect of the other, and have given to its changeful scenery and detail those fine effects which warrant us in placing "The Scairth o' Bartle" at the high-water mark of the author's North-coast poems.

Humor.

Among other realistic studies, "Edward Crowhurst" and "Jane Lawson" will repay attention. That this poet has humor of the Tam-o'-Shanter kind is shown in the racy sketch of Widow Mysie, and by the English and Scottish Eclogues. He also has done good work after Browning's lighter manner, of which "De Berny" (a life-like study of a French refugee in London) and "Kitty Kemble" may be taken as examples. The latter, by its flowing satire, reminds us of Swift, but is mellowed with the kindness and charity which redeem from cynicism the wit of a true poet. The ease and grace of these two poems are very noticeable.

"The Book of Orm," 1870.

It is in another direction that Buchanan has made his decided revolt against the modes and canons of the period. *The Book of Orm* invites us to a spiritual region, where fact and materialism cannot hamper his imaginings. To many it will seem that, in taking metaphysics with him, he but exchanges one set of hindrances for another. It is a natural outcome

of his Scottish genius that he should find himself discussing the nature of evil, and applying mysticism to the old theological problems. The "Book" itself is hard to describe, being a study of the meaning of good and evil, as observed through a kind of Celtic haze; and even the author, to explain his own purpose, resorts to the language of a friendly critic, who pronounces it "a striking attempt to combine a quasi-Ossianic treatment of nature with a philosophy of rebellion rising into something like a Pantheistic vision of the necessity of evil." The poet himself adds that to him its whole scope is "to vindicate the ways of God to Man [*sic*]." He thus brings the great instance of Milton to sustain his propagandism, but while poetry, written with such intent, may be sensuous, and often is passionate, it never can be entirely simple. The world has well agreed that what is fine in "Paradise Lost" is the poetry; what is tiresome, the theology; yet the latter certainly furnished the motive of England's greatest epic. In adopting a theme which, after all, is didactics under a spiritual glamour, Buchanan has chosen a distinctive ground. The question is, What sort of art is the result? Inevitably a strange mixture of poetry and prose, — the relative proportions varying with the flow of the poet's imagination. "The Book of Orm" is largely made up of vague aspiration, rhetoric, padded and unsatisfactory verse. It contains, withal, very fine poetry, of which one or two specimens are as good as anything the author has composed. A portion of the work has a trace of the weird quality to be found in nearly all of Blake's pictures, and in most of his verse. The "Soul and Flesh," the "Flower of the World," and the "Drinkers of Hemlock" are thus

Transcendental and lacking simplicity;

but fine here and there.

characterized. Two episodes are prominent among the rest. "The Dream of the World without Death" is a strong and effective poem: a vision of the time when

> "There were no kisses on familiar faces,
> No weaving of white grave-clothes, no lost pondering
> Over the still wax cheeks and folded fingers.
>
> "There was no putting tokens under pillows,
> There was no dreadful beauty slowly fading,
> Fading like moonlight softly into darkness.
>
> "There were no churchyard paths to walk on, thinking
> How near the well-beloved ones are lying.
> There were no sweet green graves to sit and muse on,
>
> "Till grief should grow a summer meditation,
> The shadow of the passing of an angel,
> And sleeping should seem easy, and not cruel.
>
> "Nothing but wondrous parting and a blankness."

Of a still higher order is "The Vision of the Man Accurst," which is marked by fine imagination, though conceits and artificial phrases somewhat lessen its effect. It seems to me the poet's strongest production thus far, and holds among his mystical pieces the position of "The Scairth o' Bartle" among the Scottish tales.

"Napoleon Fallen," and the "Drama of Kings," 1871.

In applying the Orphic method to contemporary politics he makes a failure akin to that of Shelley in "The Revolt of Islam." Having perceived the weakness of his poems upon the Franco-German war, he gives them to us under new titles, and largely pruned or otherwise remodelled. Much of the political verse is written in a mouthing manner, inferior to his narrative style. The aspiration of Shelley's

writings doubtless went far to sustain the melody that renders them so exquisite. Whatever Buchanan's mission may be, it detracts from, rather than enhances, his genius as a poet. In reformatory lyrics and sonnets he does not rise so very far above the level of Massey and other spasmodic rhymesters. An American, living in a country where every mechanic is the peer of Buchanan as a reformer, and where poetry is considerably scarcer than "progress," is likely to care not so much for a singer's theories as for the quality of his song.

Buchanan's versatility, and desire to obtain a hearing in every province of his art, have impelled him to some curious ventures, among which are two romantic volumes upon American themes, published anonymously, but now acknowledged as his own. *St. Abe* and *White Rose and Red* have been commended for fidelity of local color and diction, but readers to the manner born will assure the author that he has succeeded only in being faithful to a British ideal of American frontier life. To compensate us, we have some thin poetry in his Maine romance, while in the Salt Lake extravaganza I can find none at all. His critical prose-writings are marked by eloquence and vigor, but those of a polemical order have, I should opine, entailed upon him more vexation than profit. He is said to figure creditably as a playwright, "The Witch-Finder" and "The Madcap Prince" having met with success upon the London stage.

"St. Abe," 1871.

"White Rose and Red," 1873.

Prose writings.

Stage-plays.

As a result of his impulse to handle every theme that occurs to him, and to essay all varieties of style, much of his poetry, even after the winnowing to which it has been subjected, is not free from sterile and prosaic chaff. A lesser fault is the custom of

Faults of judgment and style.

handicapping his pieces with affected preludes, and his volumes with metrical statements of their purpose, — barbarisms taken from a period when people did not clearly see that Art must stand without crutches. Occasionally a theme which he selects, such as the description from Heine's "Reisebilder" of the vanishing of the old gods, is more of a poem than any verses that can be set to it. Nor do we care for such an excess of self-annunciation as is found in the prelude to "Bexhill." Faults of style are less common, yet he does not wholly escape the affectations of a school with which he is in open conflict. Still, he can be artistic to a degree not exceeded in the most careful poetry of his time. "The Ballad of Judas Iscariot," which he has done well to place at the opening of his collection, is equal in finish to anything written since "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and approaches that poem in weird impressiveness and power. Among his sonnets, those of the Coruisken series, sustained by lofty feeling and noble diction, are without doubt the best.

An impressive ballad.

In conclusion, it would appear that his work of the last five years is not an advance upon his Scottish idyls, and that a natural and charming poet has been retarded by conceiving an undue sense of his inspiration as a seer, a mystic, a prophet of the future. Moreover, like Southey, Buchanan has somewhat too carefully nursed his reputation. The sibyls confided their leaves to the winds, and knew that nothing which the gods thought worth preserving could be effaced by the wanton storm. His merits lie in his originality, earnestness, and admirable understanding of nature, in freedom of style and strength of general effect. His best poetry grows upon the reader.

The past and future.

He still is young, scarcely having begun the mature creative period, and, if he will study the graces of restraint, and cling to some department of art in which he is easily foremost, should not fail of a new and still more successful career.

III.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: born in London, May 12, 1828.

ROSSETTI is one of those men whose significant position is not so much due to the amount of work which they produce as to its quality, and to the principles it has suggested. Such leaders often are found, and influence contemporary thought by the personal magnetism that attracts young and eager spirits to gather around them. Sometimes a man of this kind, in respect to creative labor, is greater than his productions. But if Rossetti's special attitude has been of more account than his poetry, it is not because he lacks the power to equalize the two. He has chosen to give his energies to a kindred art of expression, for which his genius is no less decided. Yet his influence as a poet, judging from his writings, and from even a meagre knowledge of his life and associates, seems to be radical and more or less enduring.

His distinctive force and attitude.

A stream broadens as it flows. Already, in the careers of Morris and Swinburne, we see the forms of extension through which the indestructibility of nature is secured for a specific mode of art. The instinct is not so far wrong which connects these poets with Rossetti, and calls the circle by his name. Three men could not be more independent of one another in their essential gifts; yet there is some common chain between them to which the clew most

Comrades in art.

likely was obtained first by Rossetti, — he being the eldest, and the first to seize it in his search after beauty's underlying laws. It is true that Morris, a comrade near his own age, dedicated a book of poetry to him long before the artist had compiled a volume of his own poems; nevertheless, we gather the idea that the conversation and presence of Rossetti had a formative influence upon the author of "The Earthly Paradise," as well as upon that younger singer whose dramatic genius already has half determined what is to be the poetic tendency of the era now beginning. We turn to the young for confirmation of our views with regard to the immediate outlook; for it is the privilege of youth to discern the freshest and most potential style. A prophetic sensitiveness, wiser than the dulled experience of age, unites it to the party of the future.

Recent poetry and the arts of design.

Since the master treatise of Lessing there has been no question of the impassable barriers betwixt the provinces of the artist and the poet. Poetry, however, furnishes themes to the painter; and of late, painting, through study of elemental processes, has enriched the field of poetry, — to which Rossetti's contribution is the latest, if not the greatest, and has the charm of something rare that is brought to us from another land. He was an early member of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in painting, Millais and Holman Hunt being his most famous associates. He also has had some connection with Morris in the decorative artwork to which the latter has been so enviably devoted. The element which Rossetti's verse and bearing have brought into English poetry holds to that art the relation of Pre-Raphaelite painting and decoration to painting and decoration of the academic

Pre-Raphaelitism: its use and abuse.

kind. As a figure-painter, his drawings, such as I have seen, are far above the strictly realistic work produced by acolytes of his order. The term realism constantly is used to cloak the mediocrity of artists whose designs are stiff, barren, and grotesque, — the form without the soul. They deal with the minor facts of art, unable to compass the major; their labor is scarcely useful as a stepping-stone to higher things; if it were not so unimaginative, it would have more value as a protest against conventionalism and a guide to something new. But Rossetti, a man of genius, has lighted his canvas and his pages with a quality that is more ennobling. He has discerned the spirit of beauty, wandering within the confines of a region whose landscape is visible, not to groundlings, but to the poet's finer sight. Even his strictly Pre-Raphaelite verse, odd and weird as it may at first appear, is full of exaltation and lyrical power.

Genius of Rossetti.

Such of his ballads as recall the Troubadour period are no more realistic than the ballads of the idyllic poets. They are studies of what the Pre-Chaucerian minstrels saw, and partly result from use of their materials. However rich and rare, they hold, in the youth of the new movement, no more advanced position than that of Tennyson's "Oriana" and "The Lady of Shalott" compared with his epic and philosophic masterpieces. This point is worth consideration. The Laureate's work of this kind was an effort, in default of natural themes, to borrow something from that old Romantic art which so long has passed away as again to have the effect of newness.

See page 176.

Much of Rossetti's verse is of this sort, yet possessing a quality which shows that his genius, if fully exercised, might lead him to far greater achievements

as an English poet. Consecrated, from his Italian parentage, to learning, art, and song, — reared in a household over which the mediæval spirit has brooded, — he is thoroughly at home among romantic themes and processes, while a feeling like that of Dante exalts the maturer portion of his emblematic verse.

Translations from "The Early Italian Poets."

In fact, he made his first appearance as a writer with a volume of translations, — *The Early Italian Poets*, published in 1861. In the new edition (1874), entitled "Dante and his Circle, with the Italian Poets preceding him," more stress is laid upon the arrangement of the book. Dante, through the "Vita Nuova" and many lyrics associated with his friends, is made the luminous central figure of a group of poets who shine partly by their own and partly by reflected light. Sonnets, lyrics, and canzonets are given also from more than forty additional writers, chiefly of an earlier date, and the whole volume is edited with patient learning and religious care. The time and poetry are elucidated with a fidelity and beauty not to be found in any English or Continental essays in the same field. An exquisite spirit possesses the workman and the work. An Anglo-Italian, he has a double nature, like that of the enchanter who understood the speech of birds. Whatever original work he might have produced with the same labor, it hardly could be a greater addition to our literature than this admirable transcript of Italy's most suggestive period and song.

"Poems," 1870.

Rossetti's own poems are collected in a single volume. Twoscore ballads, songs, and studies, with thrice that number of sonnets, make up its contents; but there are not a few to maintain that here we have "infinite riches in a little room." A reviewer

is grateful to one who waits for songs that sing themselves, and does not force us to examine long cantos for a satisfactory estimate of his power. Some of these poems were composed years ago, but the author does not specify them, "as nothing has been included which he believes to be immature." Conscientiousness is a feature of this artist's work. A poet is not to be measured by the quantity of his outpourings; if otherwise, what of Keats or Collins, and what of Southey and Young?

Style and language.

In this collection, then, I find no verse so realistic as to be unimaginative; but I do find a quaint use of old phraseology, and a revival of the early rhythmical accents. The result is a not unpleasant mannerism, of a kind that is visible in the poetry of Morris and Swinburne, and also crops out frequently in recent miscellaneous verse. Besides enriching, like Tennyson, our modern English by the revival of obsolete yet effective Saxon and Norman words, Rossetti adds to its flexibility by novel inversions and accentual endings. With regard to the diction, it should be noted that such forms as "herseemed," though here in keeping, would be unendurable in the verse of an imitator. Throughout his poetry we discern a finesse, a regard for detail, and a knowledge of color and sound, that distinguish this master of the Neo-Romantic school. His end is gained by simplicity and sure precision of touch. He knows exactly what effect he desires, and produces it by a firm stroke of color, a beam of light, a single musical tone. Herein he surpasses his comrades, and exhibits great tact in preferring only the best of a dozen graces which either of them would introduce. In terseness he certainly is before them all.

Precision of touch.

An earnest and spiritual artist.

We must accept a true poet for what he is, and be thankful. Rossetti is not the man to attract a dullard. His quaintness must seem to many as "outlandish" as the speech and garments of Christian and Faithful among the worldlings of Vanity Fair; and he is so indifferent to its outlandishness that some may deem him wanting in sense and humor. But he is too earnest, too absorbed in his own vision of things spiritual and lovely, to look at matters from the common point of view. To one willing to share his feeling, and apt to recognize the inspiration of Dürer, or William Blake, or John La Farge, the effect is not to be gainsaid. The strangeness passes away with a study of his poems. Yielding to their melody and illumination, we are bathed in the rich colors of an abbey-window and listen to the music of choristers chanting from some skyey, hidden loft.

The melody is indisputably fine, — whether from the lips of the transfigured maiden, of whom he tells us that, when

> "She spoke through the still weather,
> Her voice was like the voice the stars
> Had when they sang together";

or the witch-music of Lilith, the wife of Adam: —

> "Not a drop of her blood was human,
> But she was made like a soft, sweet woman."

It is difficult, however, to separate a single tone from the current harmony. Light and color are worthy of the music: —

> "Her eyes were deeper than the depth
> Of waters stilled at even;
> She had three lilies in her hand,
> And the stars in her hair were seven."

"Her hair, that lay along her back,
Was yellow, like ripe corn."

—"The clear-ranged unnumbered heads
Bowed with their aureoles."

—"She ceased.
The light thrilled toward her, filled
With angels in strong level flight."

"The Blessed Damozel."

Of Rossetti's lyrics in the Gothic or Romantic form, "The Blessed Damozel," from which I quote, is most widely known, and deserves its reputation. Nothing, save great originality and beauty, could win us over to its peculiar manner. It is full of imagination:—

"Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God's choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers";

"And the souls mounting up to God
Went by her like thin flames."

"I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light,—
We will step down as to a stream,
And bathe there in God's sight."

The spell of this poem, I think, lies in the feeling that even in heaven the maiden, as on earth, is so real, so living, that

"her bosom must have made
The bar she leaned on warm";

and that her terrestrial love and yearning are more to her than all the joys of Paradise. The poet, moreover, in this brief, wild lyric, seems to have conceived, like Dante, an apotheosis of some buried

mistress, — regarded, it may be, with worship, but no less with immortal passion and desire.

Ballads.

In three mediæval ballads of another class there is lyrical and dramatic power. I refer to "Troy Town," "Eden Bower," and "Sister Helen." These, with "Stratton Water" and "The Staff and Scrip," probably are as characteristic and successful as any late revival of the ballad forms.

Miscellaneous poems.

"A Last Confession" is a tragical Italian story, in blank-verse, not unlike what Browning — leaving out Rossetti's Italian song — might write upon a similar theme. "Dante at Verona" is a grave and earnest poem, sustained with dignity throughout, yet I prefer Dr. Parsons's lines "On a Bust of Dante," — that majestic lyric, the noblest of tributes to the great Florentine in our own or any other tongue. At the opposite extreme, and in a vein that differs from Rossetti's other works, we have a curious and vivid piece of realism entitled "Jenny." The poet moralizes, with equal taste and feeling, and much picturesqueness, over a beautiful but ignorant girl of the town, who no more than a child is aware of the train of thought she has inspired. A striking passage upon lust is specially effective and poetical.

Translations from the French.

I have said that as an Italian translator Rossetti is unsurpassed, and he is nearly as fine in renderings from the old French, of which both Swinburne and himself have made enthusiastic studies. Witness a stanza from "The Ballad of Dead Ladies," François Villon, 1450. The translator's inherent quaintness is suited to his task: —

> "Tell me now in what hidden way is
> Lady Flora the lovely Roman?

> Where 's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,
> Neither of them the fairer woman?
> Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
> Only heard on river and mere, —
> She whose beauty was more than human? . . . .
> But where are the snows of yester-year?"

Melody.

His lyrical faculty is exquisite; not often swift, but chaste, and purely English. "The Song of the Bower," a most tuneful love-chant, reminding us of George Darley, is a good specimen of his melody, while "The Stream's Secret" has more music in it than any *slow* lyric that I now remember. Dramatic power is indicated by true lyrical genius, and we are not surprised to find Rossetti's poems surcharged with it. As a sonneteer, also, he has no living equal. Take the group written for pictures and read the sonnet of "Mary Magdalene." It is a complete dramatic poem. The series belonging to "The House of Life," in finish, spontaneity, and richness of feeling, is such as this man alone can produce. Mrs. Browning's sonnets were the deathless revelation of her own beautiful soul; if these are more objective, they are equally perfect in another way. Finally, the imagination to which I have alluded is rarely absent from Rossetti's verse. His touches now are delicate, and again have a broad sweep: —

Rossetti's sonnets.

Imagination.

> "As though mine image in the glass
> Should tarry when myself am gone."

> "How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope,
> The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
> The wind of Death's imperishable wing?"

Aspects of his poetry and career.

In measuring his career as a poet, we at once perceive that he has moved in a somewhat narrow range with respect to both the thought and method of his

compositions; but that he approaches Tennyson in simplicity, purity, and richness of tone. His dramatic and lyrical powers are very marked, though not fully developed; if he had been restricted to verse as a means of expression, he no doubt would have added greatly to our English song. Sonnets like the "Bridal Birth" and "Nuptial Sleep," and poems so profoundly thoughtful as "The Sea-Limits" and "The Woodspurge," place him among his foremost contemporaries. He has had a magnetic influence upon those who come within his aureole. Should he complete "The House of Life" upon its original projection, he will leave a monument of beauty more lasting than the tradition of his presence. His verse is compact of tenderness, emotional ecstasy, and poetic fire. The spirit of the master whose name he bears clothes him as with a white garment. And we should expect his associates to be humble lovers of the beautiful, first of all, and through its ministry to rise to the lustrous upper heaven of spiritual art.

D. G. R. died at Birchington-on-Sea, April 9, 1882.

IV.

William Morris: born near London, 1834.

IT is but natural, then, that we should find in William Morris a poet who may be described, to use the phrase of Hawthorne, as an Artist of the Beautiful. He delights in the manifestation of objective beauty. Byron felt himself one with Nature. Morris is absorbed in the loveliness of his romantic work, and as an artist seems to find enchantment and content.

An artist of the beautiful.

In this serenity of mood he possesses that which has been denied to greater poets. True, he sings of himself,

"Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?"

but what time could be to him more fortunate? Amid the problems of our day, and the uncertainty as to what kind of art is to result from its confused elements, there is at least repose in the enjoyment of absolute beauty. There is safety in an art without a purpose other than to refresh and charm. People who labor in "six counties overhung with smoke" are willing enough to forget them. Morris's proffer of the means to this end could not have been more timely. Keats had juster cause for dissatisfaction: he could not know how eagerly men would turn to his work when the grandiloquent period, in which he found himself so valueless, should have worn itself away. Besides, he never fairly attained his ideal. To him the pursuit of Beauty, rather than the possession, was a passion and an appetite. He followed after, and depicted her, but was not at rest in her presence. Had Keats lived, — had he lived to gain the feeling of Morris, to pass from aspiration to attainment, and had his delicious poems been succeeded by others, comparing with "Isabella" and "The Eve of St. Agnes," as "The Earthly Paradise" compares with "The Defence of Guenevere," then indeed the world would have listened to a singer

Morris and Keats.

"Such as it had
In the ages glad,
Long ago!"

Morris appears to have been devoted from youth to the service of the beautiful. He has followed more than one branch of art, and enjoys, besides his fame as a poet, a practical reputation as an original

Taste, the parent of versatility in art.

and graceful designer in decorative work of many kinds. The present era, like the Venetian, and others in which taste has sprung from the luxury of wealth, seems to breed a class of handicraftsmen who are adepts in various departments of creative art. Rossetti, Morris, Linton, Scott, Woolner, Hamerton, among others, follow the arts of song or of design at will. Doubtless the poet Morris, while making his unique drawings for stained glass, wall-paper, or decorative tile-work, finds a pleasure as keen as that of the artist Morris in the construction of his metrical romances. There is balm and recreation to any writer in some tasteful pursuit which may serve as a foil to that which is the main labor and highest purpose of his life.

As for his poetry, it is of a sort which must be delightful to construct: wholly removed from self, breeding neither anguish nor disquiet, but full of soft music and a familiar olden charm. So easeful to read, it cannot be unrestful to compose, and to the maker must be its own reward. He keeps within his self-allotted region; if it be that of a lotos-eater's dream, he is willing to be deluded, and no longing for the real makes him "half sick of shadows." In this respect he is a wise, sweet, and very fortunate bard.

"The Defence of Guenevere," 1858.

Some years ago, judging of Morris by *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, the only volume which he then had printed, I wrote of him: "Never a slovenly writer, he gives us pieces that repay close reading, but also compel it, for they smack of the closet and studio rather than of the world of men and women, or that of the woods and fields. He, too, sings the deeds of Arthur and Lancelot." Let me now say that there is no purer or fresher landscape, more clearly

visible both to the author and the reader, than is to be found everywhere in the course of Morris's later volumes. Not only are his descriptions of every aspect of Nature perfect, but he enters fully into the effect produced by her changes upon our lives and feelings. He sings of June,

> "And that desire that rippling water gives
> To youthful hearts to wander anywhere";

of the drowsy August languor,

> "When men were happy, they could scarce tell why,
> Although they felt the rich year slipping by."

A thousand similar examples may be selected from his poems. But his first work was quite in sympathy with that of Rossetti: an effort to disconnect poetry from modern thought and purpose, through a return not so much to nature as to models taken from the age of ballad-romance. It was saturated with the Pre-Chaucerian spirit. In mediæval tone, color, and somewhat rigid drawing, it corresponded to the missal-work style of the Pre-Raphaelites in art. The manner was too studied to permit of swift movement or broad scope; the language somewhat ancient and obscure. There is much that is fine, however, in the plumed and heroic ballad, "Riding Together," and "The Haystack in the Flood" is a powerful conception, wrought out with historic truth of detail and grim dramatic effect.

Pre-Chaucerian ballads.

These thirty poems, fitly inscribed to Rossetti, made up a work whose value somewhat depended upon its promise for the future. The true Pre-Raphaelite is willing to bury his own name in order to serve his art; to spend a life, if need be, in laying the ground-

wall upon which his successors can build a new temple that shall replace the time-worn structure he has helped to tear away. But, to a man of genius, the higher service often is given later in his own career.

Morris's second volume showed that he had left the shadows of ballad minstrelsy, and entered the pleasant sunlight of Chaucer. After seven years of silence *The Life and Death of Jason* was a surprise, and was welcomed as the sustained performance of a true poet. It is a narrative poem, of epic proportions, all story and action, composed in the rhymed pentameter, strongly and sweetly carried from the first book to the last of seventeen. In this production, as in all the works of Morris, — in some respects the most notable raconteur since the time of his avowed master, Geoffrey Chaucer, — the statement is newly illustrated, that imaginative poets do not invent their own legends, but are wise in taking them from those historic treasuries of fact and fiction, the outlines of which await only a master-hand to invest them with living beauty. The invention of "Jason," for instance, does not consist in the story of the Golden Fleece, but in new effects of combination, and in the melody and vigor of the means by which these old adventurous Greeks again are made to voyage, sing, love, fight, and die before us. Its author has a close knowledge of antiquities. Here and there his method is borrowed from Homer, — as in the gathering of the chiefs, which occupies the third book. Octosyllabic songs are interspersed, such as that of Orpheus,

"The Life and Death of Jason," 1865.

Cf. "Poets of America": p. 471.

> "O bitter sea, tumultuous sea,
> Full many an ill is wrought by thee!"

after which,

"Then shouted all the heroes, and they drove
The good ship forth, so that the birds above,
With long white wings, scarce flew so fast as they."

These three lines convey an idea of the general diction; nor can any be selected from the ten thousand which compose the work that do not show how well our Saxon English is adapted for the transmission of the Homeric spirit. The poem is fresh and stirring, and the style befits the theme, though not free from harshness and careless rhymes; moreover, it must be confessed that the reader often grows weary of the prolonged tale. This is an Odyssean epic, but written with continuity of effort; not growing of itself with the growth of a nation, nor builded at long intervals like the "Idyls of the King." The poet lacks variety. His voice is in a single key, and, although it be a natural one that does not tire the ear, we are content as we close the volume, and heave a sigh of satisfied appetite rather than of regret that the entertainment has reached an end.

Translations from the Icelandic, 1869.

In his learned taste for whatever is curious and rare Morris has made researches among the Sagas of Norse literature, especially those of Iceland. The admirable translations which he made, in company with E. Magnusson, from the Icelandic Grettis and Volsunga Sagas, show how thoroughly every class of work is fashioned by his hands, and illustrate the wealth of the resources from which he obtained the conception of his latest poem.[1] *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, and *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*,

[1] He now is said to be engaged upon a lineal and literal translation of Virgil,—a work which he can hardly fail to execute speedily and well.

appeared in 1869; but in 1868, five years after the completion of "Jason," the public had been delighted with the early instalments of a charming production, which, whatever he may accomplish hereafter, fairly exhibits his powers in their most sustained and varied form.

"The Earthly Paradise," 1868-70.

The plan of *The Earthly Paradise* was conceived in a day that should be marked with a white stone, since for this poet to undertake it was to complete it. The effort was so sure to adjust itself to his genius (which is epic rather than dramatic), that the only question was one of time, and that is now a question of the past. In this important work Morris reaches the height of his success as a relator. His poems always have been stories. Even the shortest ballads in his first book are upon themes from the old chronicles. "The Earthly Paradise" has the universe of fiction for a field, and reclothes the choicest and most famous legends of Asia and Europe with the delicate fabric of its verse. Greek and Oriental lore, the tales of the Gesta Romanorum, the romance of the Nibelungen-Lied, and even the myths of the Eddas, contribute to this thesaurus of narrative song. All these tales are familiar: many of a type from which John Fiske or Müller would prove their long descent, tracing them far as the "most eastern East"; but never before did they appear in more attractive shape, or fall so musically from a poet's honeyed mouth. Their fascination is beyond question. We listen to the narrator, as Arabs before the desert fire hang upon the lips of one who recites some legend of the good Haroun. Here is a successor to Boccaccio and to Chaucer. The verse, indeed, is exclusively Chaucerian, of which three styles are used, the heroic, sestina,

Historic myths and legends.

Cp. "Poets of America": pp. 108, 109.

Three modes of Chaucerian verse.

and octosyllabic. Chance quotations show with what felicity and perfect ease the modern poet renews the cadences of his master. Take one from "Atalanta's Race": —

"Through thick Arcadian woods a hunter went,
Following the beasts up, on a fresh spring day;
But since his horn-tipped bow, but seldom bent,
Now at the noontide naught had happed to slay,
Within a vale he called his hounds away,
Hearkening the echoes of his lone voice cling
About the cliffs, and through the beech-trees ring."

Another from "The Man Born to be King": —

"So long he rode he drew anigh
A mill upon the river's brim,
That seemed a goodly place to him,
For o'er the oily, smooth millhead
There hung the apples growing red,
And many an ancient apple-tree
Within the orchard could he see,
While the smooth millwalls, white and black,
Shook to the great wheel's measured clack,
And grumble of the gear within;
While o'er the roof that dulled that din
The doves sat crooning half the day,
And round the half-cut stack of hay
The sparrows fluttered twittering."

And this, from "The Story of Cupid and Psyche": —

"From place to place Love followed her that day
And ever fairer to his eyes she grew,
So that at last when from her bower she flew,
And underneath his feet the moonlit sea
Went shepherding his waves disorderly,
He swore that of all gods and men, no one
Should hold her in his arms but he alone."

The couplet which I have italicized has an imagi-

native quality not frequent in Morris's verse, for the excellence of this poet lies rather in his clear vision and exquisite directness of speech. Examples, otherwise neither better nor worse than the foregoing, may be taken from any one of the sixteen hundred pages of his great work. I can give but the briefest statement of its method and range.

Clear expression.

In each of these metrical forms the verse is smooth and transparent, — the choice result of the author's Chaucerian studies, with what addition of beauty and suggestiveness his genius can bestow. His language is so pure that there absolutely is no resisting medium to obscure the interest of a tale. We feel that he enjoys his story as we do, yet the technical excellence, seen at once by a writer, scarcely is thought of by the lay reader, to whom poetry is in the main addressed. Morris easily grasps the feeling of each successive literature from which his stories are derived. He is at will a pagan, a Christian, or a worshipper of Odin and Thor; and especially has caught the spirit of those generations which, scarcely emerged from classicism in the South, and bordered by heathendom on the North, peopled their unhallowed places with beings drawn from either source. Christ reigned, yet the old gods had not wholly faded out, but acted, whether fair or devilish, as subjects and allies of Satan. All this is magically conveyed in such poems as "The Ring given to Venus" and "The Lady of the Land." The former may be consulted (and any other will do almost as well) for evidence of the advantage possessed by Morris through his knowledge of mediæval costumes, armor, dances, festivals, and all the curious paraphernalia of days gone by. So well equipped a virtuoso, and so facile

a rhythmist, was warranted in undertaking to write "The Earthly Paradise," broad as it is in scope, and extended to the enormous length of forty thousand lines. The result shows that he set himself a perfectly feasible task.

In this work he avoids the prolonged strain of "Jason," by making, with few exceptions, each story of a length that can be read at a sitting. His harmonic turn is shown in the arrangement of them all under the signs of the zodiac. We have one classical and one mediæval legend for each month of the year. I take it that the framework of the whole, the romance of voyagers in search of an earthly Paradise, is familiar to the reader. While Morris claims Chaucer, as Dante claimed Virgil, for his master, this only relates to the purpose and form of his poetry, for the freshness and sweetness are his own. He has gone to Chaucer, but also to nature, — to the earth whence sprang that well of English undefiled. His descriptive preludes, that serenely paint each phase of the revolving year, and the scenic touches throughout his stories, are truthful and picturesque. He uses but few and often-repeated adjectives; like the early rhapsodists, once having chosen an epithet for a certain thing, he clings to it, never introducing, for novelty's sake, another that is poorer than the best.

A tinge of fatalism.

Morris fairly escapes from our turmoil and materialism by this flight to the refuge of amusement and simple art. A correlative moral runs through all of his poetry; one which, it must be owned, savors of pagan fatalism. The thought conveyed is that nothing should concern men but to enjoy what hollow good the gods award us, and this in the present, be-

fore the days come when we shall say we have no pleasure in them, — before death come, which closes all. He not only chooses to be a dreamer of dreams, and will not "strive to set the crooked straight," but tells us, —

> "Yes, ye are made immortal on the day
> Ye cease the dusty grains of time to weigh";

and in every poem has some passage like this: —

> "Fear little, then, I counsel you,
> What any son of man can do;
> Because a log of wood will last
> While many a life of man goes past,
> And all is over in slight space."

His hoary voyagers have toiled and wandered, as they find, in vain: —

> "Lo,
> A long life gone, and nothing more they know,
> Why they should live to have desire and foil,
> And toil, that, overcome, brings yet more toil,
> Than that day of their vanished youth, when first
> They saw Death clear, and deemed all life accurst
> By that cold, overshadowing threat, — the End."

"Carpe diem."

They have nothing left but to beguile the remnant of their hours with story and repose, until the grave shall be reached, in which there is neither device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom. The poet's constant injunction is to seize the day, to strive not for greater or new things, since all will soon be over, and who knoweth what is beyond? In his epilogue to the entire work he faithfully epitomizes its spirit: —

> "Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
> Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
> Though still the less we knew of its intent:
> The Earth and Heaven through countless year on year,

Slow changing, were to us but curtains fair,
Hung round about a little room, where play
Weeping and laughter of man's empty day."

This tinge of fatalism has a saddening effect upon Morris's verse, and thus far lessens its charm. A shadow falls across the feast. One of his critics has well said that "A poet, in this age of the world, who would be immortal, must write as if he himself believed in immortality." His personages, moreover, are phantasmal, and really seem as if they issued from the ivory gate. Again, while his latest work is a marvel of prolonged strength and industry, its length gives it somewhat of an encyclopedic character. The last volume was not received so eagerly as the first. I would not quote against the author that saying of Callimachus, "a great book is a great evil"; nevertheless we feel that he has a too facile power, — a story once given him, — of putting it into rippling verse as rapidly as another man can write it in prose. Still, "The Earthly Paradise" is a library of itself, and in yielding to its spell we experience anew the delights which the "Arabian Nights" afforded to our childhood. What more tempting than to loll in such an "orchard-close" as the poet is wont to paint for us, and — with clover blooming everywhere, and the robins singing about their nests — to think it a portion of that fairy-land "East of the Sun and West of the Moon"; or to read the fay-legends of "The Watching of the Falcon" and "Ogier the Dane," or that history of "The Lovers of Gudrun," which possibly is the finest, as it is the most extended, of all our author's romantic poems? What more potent spell to banish care and pain? And let there be some one near to sing: —

Metrical facility.

"In the white-flowered hawthorn brake,
Love, be merry for my sake;
Twine the blossoms in my hair,
Kiss me where I am most fair, —
Kiss me, love! for who knoweth
What thing cometh after death?"

Sweet, but unimpassioned, measures.

We have seen that the poetry of William Morris is thoroughly sweet and wholesome, fair with the beauty of green fields and summer skies, and pervaded by a restful charm. Yet it is but the choicest fashion of romantic narrative-verse. The poet's imagination is clear, but never lofty; he never will rouse the soul to elevated thoughts and deeds. His low, continuous music reminds us of those Moorish melodies whose delicacy and pathos come from the gentle hearts of an expiring race, and seem the murmurous echo of strains that had an epic glory in the far-away past. Readers who look for passion, faith, and high imaginings, will find his measures cloying in the end.

Relative positions of the Neo-Romantic poets.

Rossetti's work has been confined to Pre-Chaucerian minstrelsy, and to the spiritualism of the early Italian school. Morris advances to a revival of the narrative art of Chaucer. The next effort, to complete the cyclic movement, should renew the fire and lyric outburst of the dramatic poets. Let us estimate the promise of what already has been essayed in that direction; — but to do this we must listen to the voice of the youngest and most impassioned of the group that stand with feet planted upon the outer circuit of the Victorian choir, and with faces looking eagerly toward the future.

CHAPTER XI.

LATTER-DAY SINGERS.

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.

Algernon Charles Swinburne: born in London, April 5, 1837.

SOME years have passed since this poet took the critical outposts by storm, and with a single effort gained a laurel-crown, of which no public envy, nor any lesser action of his own, thenceforth could dispossess him. The time has been so crowded with his successive productions — his career, with all its strength and imprudence, has been so thoroughly that of a poet — as to heighten the interest which only a spirit of most unusual quality can excite and long maintain.

We have just observed the somewhat limited range of William Morris's vocabulary. It is composed mainly of plain Saxon words, chosen with great taste and musically put together. No barrenness, however, is perceptible, since to enrich that writer's language from learned or modern sources would disturb the tone of his pure English feeling. The nature of Swinburne's diction is precisely opposite. His faculty of expression is so brilliant as to obscure the other elements which are to be found in his verse, and constantly to lead him beyond the wisdom of art. Nevertheless, reflecting upon his genius and the chances of his future, it is difficult for any one to write with cold restraint who has an eye to see, an

His diction.

ear to hear, and the practice which forces an artist to wonder at the lustre, the melody, the unstinted fire and movement, of his imperious song.

I.

His surprising command of rhythm.

I WISH, then, to speak at some length upon the one faculty in which Swinburne excels any living English poet; in which I doubt if his equal has existed among recent poets of any tongue, unless Shelley be excepted, or, possibly, some lyrist of the modern French school. This is his miraculous gift of rhythm, his command over the unsuspected resources of a language. That Shelley had a like power is, I think, shown in passages like the choruses of "Prometheus Unbound," but he flourished half a century ago, and did not have (as Swinburne has) Shelley for a predecessor! A new generation, refining upon the lessons given by himself and Keats, has carried the art of rhythm to extreme variety and finish. Were Shelley to have a second career, his work, if no finer in single passages, would have, all in all, a range of musical variations such as we discover in Swinburne's. So close is the resemblance in quality of these two voices, however great the difference in development, as almost to justify a belief in metempsychosis. A master is needed to awake the spirit slumbering in any musical instrument. Before the advent of Swinburne we did not realize the full scope of English verse. In his hands it is like the violin of Paganini. The range of his fantasias, roulades, arias, new effects of measure and sound, is incomparable with anything hitherto known. The first emotion of one who studies even his immature work is that of wonder at the

freedom and richness of his diction, the susurrus of his rhythm, his unconscious alliterations, the endless change of his syllabic harmonies, — resulting in the alternate softness and strength, height and fall, riotous or chastened music, of his affluent verse. How does he produce it? Who taught him all the hidden springs of melody? He was born a tamer of words: a subduer of this most stubborn, yet most copious of the literary tongues. In his poetry we discover qualities we did not know were in the language, — a softness that seemed Italian, a rugged strength we thought was German, a blithe and debonair lightness we despaired of capturing from the French. He has added a score of new stops and pedals to the instrument. He has introduced, partly from other tongues, stanzaic forms, measures and effects untried before; and has brought out the swiftness and force of metres like the anapestic, carrying each to perfection at a single trial. Words in his hands are like the ivory balls of a juggler, and all words seem to be in his hands. His fellow-craftsmen, who alone can understand what has been done in their art, will not term this statement extravagance. Speaking only of his command over language and metre, I have a right to reaffirm, and to show by many illustrations, that he is the most sovereign of rhythmists. He compels the inflexible elements to his use. Chaucer is more limpid, Shakespeare more kingly, Milton loftier at times, Byron has an unaffected power, — but neither Shelley nor the greatest of his predecessors is so dithyrambic, and no one has been in all moods so absolute an autocrat of verse. With equal gifts, I say, none *could* have been, for Swinburne comes after and profits by the art of all. Poets often win distinction by

Unprecedented melody and freedom.

The most dithyrambic of poets.

producing work that differs from what has gone before. It seems as if Swinburne, in this ripe period, resolved to excel others by a mastery of known melodies, adding a new magic to each, and going beyond the range of the farthest. His amazing tricks of rhythm are those of a gymnast outleaping his fellows. We had Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge, after Collins and Gray, and Tennyson after Keats, but now Swinburne adds such elaboration, that an art which we thought perfected seems almost tame. In the first place, he was born a prodigy, — as much so as Morphy in chess; added to this he is the product of these latter days, a phenomenon impossible before. It is safe to declare that at last a time has come when the force of expression can no further go.

I do not say that it has not gone too far. The fruit may be, and here is, too luscious; the flower is often of an odor too intoxicating to endure. Yet what execution! Poetry, the rarest poetic feeling, may be found in simpler verse. Yet again, what execution! The voice may not be equal to the grandest music, nor trained and restrained as it should be. But the voice is there, and its possessor has the finest natural organ to which this generation has listened.

Expression carried to fatiguing excess.

Right here it is plain that Swinburne, especially in his early poems, has weakened his effects by cloying us with excessive richness of epithet and sound: in later works, by too elaborate expression and redundancy of treatment. Still, while Browning's amplification is wont to be harsh and obscure, Swinburne, even if obscure, or when the thought is one that he has repeated again and again, always gives us unapproachable melody and grace. It is true that his glories of speech often hang upon the slightest thread

of purpose. He so constantly wants to stop and sing that he gets along slowly with a plot. As we listen to his fascinating music, the meaning, like the libretto of an opera, often passes out of mind. The melody is unbroken: in this, as in other matters, Swinburne's fault is that of excess. He does not frequently admit the sweet discords, of which he is a master, nor relieve his work by simple, contrasting interludes. Until recently his voice had a narrow range; its effect resulted from changes upon a few notes. The richness of these permutations was a marvel, yet a series of them blended into mannerism. Shelley could be academic at times, and even humorous; but Swinburne's monotone, original and varied within its bounds, was thought to be the expression of a limited range of feeling, and restricted his early efforts as a dramatic lyrist.

Voice and execution always essential.

The question first asked, with regard to either a poet or singer, is, Has he voice? and then, Has he execution? We have lastly to measure the passion, imagination, invention, to which voice and method are but ministers. From the quality of the latter, the style being the man, we often may estimate the higher faculties that control them. The principle here involved runs through all the arts of beauty and use. A fine vocal gift is priceless, both for itself and for the spiritual force behind it. With this preliminary stress upon Swinburne's most conspicuous gift, let us briefly examine his record, bethinking ourselves how difficult it is to judge a poet who is obscured by his own excess of light, and whose earlier verses so cloyed the mind with richness as to deprive it of the judicial taste.

II.

Swinburne and Landor.

THERE is a resemblance, both of temperament and intellect, between Swinburne and what is known of Landor in his youth. The latter remained for a comparatively brief time at college, but the younger poet, like the elder, was a natural scholar and linguist. He profited largely by his four years at Oxford, and the five at Eton which preceded them, for his intuitive command of languages is so unusual, that a year of his study must be worth a lustrum of other men's, and he has developed this gift by frequent and exquisite usage. No other Englishman has been so able to vary his effects by modes drawn, not only from classical and Oriental literatures, but from the haunting beauty of mediæval song. I should suppose him to be as familiar with French verse, from Ronsard to Hugo, as most of us are with the poetry of our own language, — and he writes either in Greek or Latin, old and new, or in troubadour French, as if his thoughts came to him in the diction for the time assumed. No really admirable work, I think, can be produced in a foreign tongue, until this kind of lingui-naturalization has been attained.

Early dramas: published in 1861.

His first volume, *The Queen Mother and Rosamond*, gave him no reputation. Possibly it was unnoticed amid the mass of new verse offered the public. We now see that it was of much significance. It showed the new author to be completely unaffected by the current idyllic mode. Not a trace of Tennyson; just a trace, on the other hand, of Browning; above all, a true dramatic manner of the poet's own, — like nothing modern, but recalling the cadences, fire, and action of England's great dramatic period. There were

An Elizabethan manner.

many faults of construction, but also very strong and beautiful characterizations, in this youth's first essays: a manifest living in his personages for the time; such fine language as this, in "Rosamond": — *"Rosamond."*

> "I see not flesh is holier than flesh,
> Or blood than blood more choicely qualified
> That scorn should live between them."

And this: —

> "I that have roses in my name, and make
> All flowers glad to set their color by;
> I that have held a land between twin lips
> And turned large England to a little kiss;
> God thinks not of me as contemptible."

"The Queen Mother" (time: the massacre of St. Bartholomew) is a longer and more complex tragedy than that from which the foregoing lines are taken. Catherine de' Medici is strongly and clearly delineated, — a cruel, relentless, yet imposing figure. The style is caught from Shakespeare, as if the youth's pride of intellect would let him go no lower for a model. Study, for example, the language of Teligny, Act III., Scene 2; and that of Catherine, Act V., Scene 3, where she avows that if God's ministers could see what she was about to do, then *"The Queen Mother."*

> "Surely the wind would be as a hard fire,
> And the sea's yellow and distempered foam
> Displease the happy heaven; . . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . . towers and popular streets
> Should in the middle green smother and drown,
> And Havoc die with fulness."

In another scene the king says of Denise: —

"Yea, dead?
She is all white to the dead hair, who was
So full of gracious rose the air took color,
Turned to a kiss against her face."

The scene in which Catherine poisons her clown, and the whole of the closing portion of Act V., are full of strength and spirit. Scattered through the two plays are some of the curious Latin, old French, and old English lyrics which the author already was so deft at turning. The volume was inscribed to Rossetti. It reveals to a penetrative eye many traits of the genius that has since blazed out so finely, and shows the nature of Swinburne's studies and associates. The man had come who was to do what Browning had failed to do in a less propitious time, and make a successful diversion from the idyllic lead of Tennyson. The body of recent minor verse fully displays the swift and radical character of the change.

"Atalanta in Calydon," 1864.

Three years later Swinburne printed his classical tragedy, *Atalanta in Calydon.*[1] Whatever may be said of the genuineness of any reproduction of the antique, this is the best of its kind. One who undertakes such work has the knowledge that his theme is removed from popular sympathy, and must be content with a restricted audience. Swinburne took up the classical dramatic form, and really made the dry bones live, — as even Landor and Arnold had not; as no man had, before or after Shelley; that is to say, as no man has, for the "Prometheus Unbound," grand as it is, is classical only in some of its personages and in the

[1] During this time he also had written "Chastelard," but held it in reserve for future publication. "Atalanta" was begun on the day following the completion of the last-named poem.

mythical germ of its conception, — a sublime poem, full of absorbing beauty, but antique neither in spirit nor in form. "Atalanta" is upon the severest Greek model, that of Æschylus or Sophocles, and reads like an inspired translation. We cannot repeat the antique as it existed, though a poem may be better or worse. But consider the nearness of this success, and the very great poetry involved.

The best English reproduction of the antique.

Poetry and all, this thing has for once been done as well as possible, and no future poet can safely attempt to rival it. "Atalanta" is Greek in unity and simplicity, not only in the technical unities, — utterly disregarded in "Prometheus Unbound," — but in maintenance of a single pervading thought, the impossibility of resisting the inexorable high gods. The hopeless fatalism of this tragedy was not the sentiment of the joyous and reverential Greeks, but reminds us of the Hebrews, whose God was of a stern and dreadful type. This feeling, expressed in much of Swinburne's early verse, is the outcome of a haughty and untamed intellect chafing against a law which it cannot resist. Here is an imperious mind, requiring years of discipline and achievement to bring it into that harmony with its conditions through which we arrive at strength, happiness, repose.

The opening invocation of the Chief Huntsman, with its majestic verse and imagery, alone secures the reader's attention, and the succeeding chorus, at the height of Swinburne's lyric reach, resolves attention to enchantment: —

> "When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
> The mother of months in meadow or plain
> Fills the shadows and windy places
> With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;

And the brown bright nightingale amorous
Is half-assuaged for Itylus,
For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
The tongueless vigil, and all the pain."

The choruses.

Read this divine chorus, and three others equally perfect of their kind, deepening in grandeur and impressiveness: "Before the beginning of years," "We have seen thee, O Love, thou art fair," "Who hath given man speech?"—and we have read the noblest verse of a purely lyric order that has appeared since the songs and choruses of the "Prometheus." How much more dithyrambic than the unrhymed measures of Arnold! Rhyme is free as the air, that chartered libertine, to this poet, and our language in his mouth becomes not only as strong, but as musical, as the Greek. The choric spirit is here, however inharmonious the thought that God is the "supreme evil," covering us with his "hate," or the conclusion of the whole matter:—

"Who shall contend with his lords,
Or cross them or do them wrong?
Who shall bind them as with cords?
Who shall tame them as with song?
Who shall smite them as with swords?
For the hands of their kingdom are strong."

Finally, the conception of the drama is large, the imagination clear, elevated, of an even tone throughout. The herald's account of the hunt is finely poetic. The choric responses of the last dialogue form a resonant climax to the whole. As a work of art it still remains the poet's flawless effort, showing the most objective purpose and clarified by the necessity of restraint. It is good to know that a work of pure art could at once make its way. It appealed to a

select audience, but the verdict of the few was so loud and instant as to gain for "Atalanta" a popular reading,—especially in rude America, with her strange, pathetic, misunderstood yearning for a rightful share of the culture and beauty of the older world.

"Chastelard" appeared in the ensuing year; but as I wish to mention this poem in some discussion of the larger work to which it holds the relation of the first division of a trilogy, and of Swinburne's character as a dramatist, let us pass to the miscellaneous productions of the ten years intervening between "Atalanta" and "Bothwell."

III.

"Poems and Ballads," 1866.

SWINBURNE'S work revived the interest felt in poetry. His power was so evident that the public looked to see what else had come from his pen. This led to the collection, under the title of *Poems and Ballads*, of various lyrical pieces, some of which had been contributed to the serials, while others now were printed for the first time. Without fair consideration, this volume was taken as a new and studied work of the mature poet, and there was much astonishment over its contents. Here began a notable literary discussion. If unmeasured praise had been awarded to Swinburne for the chastity and beauty of "Atalanta," he now was made to feel how the critical breath could shift to the opposite extreme and balance its early favor with reprehension of the severest kind. Here was a series of wild and Gothic pieces, full of sensuous and turbid passion, lavishing a prodigious wealth of music and imagery upon the most perilous themes, and treating them in an openly defiant manner.

Excitement created by this book.

Sense was everywhere exalted above spirituality; and to them who did not consider the formative nature of the book and the dramatic purpose of the least restrained ballads, it seemed as if the young author was lusting after strange gods, and had plunged into adoration of Venus and Priapus; or that he had drunk of Circe's goblet, and was crowning himself with garlands ere his transformation into one of the beasts that follow in her train. Rebukes were freely uttered, — indeed, a storm of denunciation began. Friends and partisans rushed to his defence; and at last the poet spoke for himself, with no doubtful force of satire and scorn, in reply both to the reviewers and to an able but covert attack made against him by a rival singer. So fierce a literary antagonism has not been known since the contests of Byron and the Lake school. Of course it gave the book a wide reading, followed by a marked influence upon the style of fledgling poets. The lyrics were reprinted in America, with the new title of "Laus Veneris," — taken from the opening poem, another presentment of the Tannhäuser legend that has bewitched so many of the recent French and English minstrels. The author's reputation, hitherto confined to the admirers of "Atalanta," now extended to the masses who read from curiosity. Some were content to reprehend, or smack their lips over the questionable portions of the new book; but many, while perceiving the crudeness of the ruder strains, rejoiced in the lyrical splendor that broke out here and there, and welcomed the poet's unique additions to the metric and stanzaic forms of English verse.

"Notes on Poems and Reviews," 1866.

A literary antagonism.

That Swinburne fairly provoked censure he must himself have been aware, if he cared enough about

the matter to reflect at all. I have no doubt he was astonished at its vehemence, and in truth the outcry of the moralists may have been overloud. People did not see, what now is clear enough, that these poems and ballads represented the primal stages of the poet's growth. Good or bad, they were brought together and frankly given to the public. Doubtless, were the author now to make up a library edition of his works, there are several of these pieces he would prefer to omit. Of what writer may there not as much be said, unless, like Rossetti, he has lived beyond the years of Byron before publishing at all? It chances, however, that certain lyrics which we well could spare on account of their unpleasant suggestions are among the most beautiful in language and form. Others, against which no ethical objections can lie, are weakened by the author's feeblest affectations. All young poets have sins to answer for: to Swinburne men could say, as Arthur to Guenevere, "And in the flesh thou hast sinned!" so morbid and absurd are some of the phrases in this collection. Certainly there was an offence against good taste and discretion, and, if some of the poems were open to the interpretation given them, an offence of a more serious nature, for all indecency is outlawed of art. The young poet, under a combination of influences, seems to have had a marked attack of that green-sickness which the excited and untrained imagination, mistaking its own fancies for experience, undergoes before gaining strength through the vigor of healthy passion, mature and self-contained. Still, there are those who can more easily forgive the worst of Swinburne's youthful antics than those unconscious sins of commonplace, plagiarism, turgidity, — the hun-

Censure fairly provoked, but too vehement.

The volume an outgrowth of the poet's formative period.

dred weak offences that are pardoned in the early verse of men who make their mark as poets.

After all, "Poems and Ballads" *was* a first book, though printed later than "Atalanta." The juvenile pieces which it contained, written during college life, are now announced for removal into a volume of acknowledged "Early Poems," including also the dramas of "Rosamond" and "The Queen Mother." But the original volume is of great interest, because it exhibits the germs of everything for which the author has become distinguished. Its spirit is that of unbounded freedom, of resistance to an established ideal, — for Swinburne, with Shelley and kindred poets, has seen that finer ideals will take the place of those that are set aside. Meantime, in advance of a new revelation, he devoted himself to the expression of sensuous, even riotous beauty. Unequal as they are, these lyrics led up to work like "Atalanta," "Songs before Sunrise," and "Bothwell." They were the ferment of the heated fancy, and, though murky and unsettled, to be followed by clarity, sweetness, and strength. The fault of the book is excess. This poet, extravagant in spiritual or political revolt, in disdain, in dramatic outbursts, was no less so in his treatment of sensuous themes. He could not be otherwise, except when restrained by his artistic conscience in work modelled upon accepted forms.

The "ferment of new wine."

Among the earlier lyrics are to be numbered, I imagine, those mediæval studies near the close of the volume which belong to the same class with much of Rossetti's and Morris's verse, yet never could be thought to come from any hand but Swinburne's own. Such are "The Masque of Queen Bersabe" (a miracle play), "A Christmas Carol," "St. Dorothy,"

Early Gothic studies.

and various ballads, — besides the "Laus Veneris," to which I already have referred. In other pieces we discover the influence which French art and literature had exerted upon the author. His acquaintance with the round of French minstrelsy made it natural for him to produce a kind of work that at first would not be relished by the British taste and ear. The richness of the foreign qualities brought into English verse by Swinburne has made amends for a passing phase of Gallic sensualism. What now crosses the Channel is of a different breed from the stilted formalism of Boileau. With the rise of Hugo and the new Romantic school came freedom, lyrical melody, and dramatic fire. Elsewhere in this volume we note the still more potential Hebraic influence. "Aholibah" is closely imitated from Hebrew prophecy, and "A Ballad of Burdens" is imbued with a similar spirit, reading like the middle choruses in "Atalanta." More classical studies, "Phædra" and "At Eleusis," approach the grade of Landor's "Hellenics." The "Hymn to Proserpine" is a beautiful and noble poem, dramatically reviving the emotion of a pagan who chooses to die with his gods, and musical with cadences which this poet has made distinctly his own. "Anactoria" and "Dolores," two pieces against which special objection has been made, exhibit great beauty of treatment, and a mystical though abnormal feeling, and are quite too fine to lose. The author holds them to be dramatic studies, written for men and not for babes, and connects them with "The Garden of Proserpine" and "Hesperia," in order to illustrate the transition from passion to satiety, and thence to wisdom and repose. The little sonnet, "A Cameo," suggests the rationale of this conception, and the

French,

Hebraic,

and classical influences.

latter, I may add, is practically illustrated by a review of Swinburne's own productions, from the "Poems and Ballads" up to "Bothwell."

Very fine poetry.

The value of the book consists in its fine poetry, and especially in the structure of that poetry, so full of lyrical revelations, of harmonies unknown before. Take any stanza of an apostrophe to the sea, in "The Triumph of Time": —

> "O fair green-girdled mother of mine,
> Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain,
> Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine,
> Thy large embraces are keen like pain.
> Save me and hide me with all thy waves,
> Find me one grave of thy thousand graves,
> Those pure cold populous graves of thine,
> Wrought without hand in a world without stain."

Or take any couplet from "Anactoria," that musical and fervent poem, whose imagination and expression are so welded together, and wherein the English heroic verse is long sustained at a height to which it rarely has ventured to aspire: —

> "Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
> Except these kisses of my lips on thine
> Brand them with immortality; but me —
> Men shall not see bright fire nor hear the sea,
> Nor mix their hearts with music, nor behold
> Cast forth of heaven with feet of awful gold
> And plumeless wings that make the bright air blind,
> Lightning, with thunder for a hound behind
> Hunting through fields unfurrowed and unsown, —
> But in the light and laughter, in the moan
> And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
> And shudder of water that makes felt on land
> The immeasurable tremor of all the sea,
> Memories shall mix and metaphors of me."

A certain amount of such writing is bold and fine.

The public knows, however, that it was carried by Swinburne to excess; that in erotic verse a confection of luscious and cloying epithets was presented again and again. At times there was an extravagance which would have been absent if this poet, who has abundant wit and satire, had also then had a hearty sense of humor, and which he himself must smile at now. But go further, and observe his original handling of metres, as in the "Hymn to Proserpine":—

Unwholesome and fantastic extravagance,

"Wilt thou yet take all, Galilean? but these thou shalt not take,
The laurel, the palms, and the pæan, the breasts of the nymphs in the brake";

and in "Hesperia":—

"Out of the golden remote wild west where the sea without shore is,
Full of the sunset, and sad, if at all, with the fulness of joy,
As a wind sets in with the autumn that blows from the region of stories,
Blows with a perfume of songs and of memories beloved from a boy."

for which we are compensated by novel and beautiful effects of rhythm.

Examine, too, the remarkable group of songs, set to melodies so fresh and novel: among others, "Dedication," "The Garden of Proserpine," "Madonna Mia," "Rococo," and "Before Dawn." If these have their faults, what wrinkle can any Sybarite find in such a rose-leaf as the lyric called "A Match":—

"If love were what the rose is,
And I were like the leaf,
Our lives would grow together
In sad or singing weather,
Blown fields or flowerful closes,
Green pleasure or gray grief;
If love were what the rose is,
And I were like the leaf."

The tender and pious stanzas in memory of Landor are included among these lyrics. The collection, after we have noted its weaknesses, extravagance, lack of technical and moral restraint, still remains the most striking, the most suggestive volume of miscellaneous poems that has been offered by any poet of the younger schools. And it must be confessed that since its appearance, and after the period of growth which it represents, not a note has been uttered by its author to which the most rigid of moralists can honestly object.

"Ave atque Vale": a lofty elegiac ode.

The full bloom of his lyrical genius appears not only in the choruses of "Atalanta," but in that large-moulded ode, "Ave atque Vale," composed in memory of Charles Baudelaire. It is founded on the model of famous English prototypes, to wit, the "Epitaph of Bion." If unequal to "Lycidas" in idyllic feeling, or to "Adonais" in lofty scorn and sorrow, it is more imaginative than the former, and surpasses either in continuity of tone and the absolute melody of elaborate verse. Arnold's "Thyrsis" is a wise and manly poem, closely adjusted to the classic phrase; but here is an ethereal strain of the highest elegiac order, fashioned in a severe yet flexible spirit of lyric art. In stanzaic beauty it ranks, with Keats's odes, among our rarest examples. Critics who have sat at the feet of Wordsworth should remember that Swinburne, in youth, was powerfully affected by the poetry of the wild and gifted author of "Les Fleurs du Mal." This threnody comes as directly from the heart as those of Shelley or Arnold lamenting Keats or Clough. Baudelaire and his group constituted what might be termed the Franco-Sapphic school. Their spirit pervades many of the "Poems and Bal-

Baudelaire.

lads"; but Swinburne, more fortunate than his teacher, has lived to outlive this phase, and is nearing his visioned "Hesperia" of strength and luminous calm. The "Ave atque Vale" is a perfect example of the metrical affluence that renders his verse a marvel. It is found in the opening lines: —

Metrical affluence.

"Shall I strew on thee rose, or rue, or laurel,
Brother, on this that was the veil of thee?" —

The second stanza, recalling the dead poet's favorite ideal, is highly characteristic: —

"For always thee the fervid, languid glories
Allured of heavier suns in mightier skies;
Thine ears knew all the wandering watery sighs
Where the sea sobs round Lesbian promontories,
The barren kiss of piteous wave to wave,
That knows not where is that Leucadian grave
Which hides too deep the supreme head of song."

An imagination like that of "Hyperion" is found in other stanzas: —

"Now all strange hours and all strange loves are over,
Dreams and desires and sombre songs and sweet,
Hast thou found place at the great knees and feet
Of some pale Titan-woman like a lover,
Such as thy vision here solicited,
Under the shadow of her fair vast head,
The deep division of prodigious breasts,
The solemn slope of mighty limbs asleep,
The weight of awful tresses that still keep
The savor and shade of old-world pine-forests
Where the wet hill-winds weep?" —

In one sense the motive thought is below the technical grandeur of the poem. Its ideals are Sappho, Proserpine, Apollo, and the Venus of Baudelaire, — not the Cytherean, but the Gothic Venus "of the

hollow hill." The round of Baudelaire's conceptions is thus pursued, after the antique fashion, with exquisite and solemn power. The tone is not one of high laudation, but of a minstrel who recalls the dead as he was, — a chant of sorrow and appreciation, not of hope. What extravagance there may be is in the passion and poetry lavished upon the theme. It is an ode written for persons of delicate culture; no one else can grasp the allusions, though who so dull as not to be captivated by the sound! But the same may be said of "Adonais" or "Hylas"; and here again recurs the question asked concerning Landor, Shall not the wise, as well as the witless, have their poets?

Tribute to the memory of Gautier. 1872.

The "Memorial Verses on the Death of Théophile Gautier" are also beautiful. They are composed in a grave form of quatrain resembling, though with a difference, FitzGerald's version of the "Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám." The elegy is the longest of our author's contributions to a volume in which eighty poets of France, Italy, and England united to lay upon the tomb of Gautier a wreath more profuse with laurels than any other which has been recorded in the history of elegiac song. Swinburne's portion of this remarkable tribute includes, also, an English sonnet, a sonnet and an ode in French, and Greek and Latin verses such as, I think, no other of the chanting multitude could have composed. A word in respect to his talent for this kind of work. Possibly Landor was a more ready Latinist, but no Englishman has written Greek elegiac to equal either the dedication of "Atalanta" or the Gautier "inscriptions" contained in this memorial volume. Having spoken of the uselessness of Landor's classical exploits, I would

Swinburne's gift of tongues.

See page 62.

here add that their uselessness relates to the audience, and not to the poet. The effect of such practice upon himself and Swinburne would of itself argue for this amendment. The younger poet's own language is so modest and suggestive, that in repeating what was privately uttered I simply do him justice by stating his position better than it can otherwise be stated. "The value of modern Latin or Greek verse," he says, "depends, I think, upon the execution. Good verse, at any time, is a good thing, and a change of instrument now and then is good practice for the performer's hand. . . . . I confess that I take delight in the metrical forms of any language of which I know anything whatever, simply for the metre's sake, as a new musical instrument; and, as soon as I can, I am tempted to try my hand or my voice at a new mode of verse, like a child trying to sing before it can speak plain." In short, to a poet like Swinburne diversions of this kind have a practical value, even though they seem to be those of a knight tilting at a wayside tournament as he rides on his votive quest.

His own statement of the value of modern Latin or Greek verse.

We have dwelt so long upon the lyrics as to have little space for examination of more recent and important works. My object has been to observe the development of the poet's genius, and thence derive an estimate of his present career. From 1867 to 1871 he gave his ardent sympathy to the cause of European freedom, exerting himself in laudation, almost in apotheosis, of the republican heroes and martyrs. Possibly his radical tendency was strengthened in youth by association with a sturdy grandsire, the late Sir John Swinburne, who was a personal friend of Mirabeau, and to the last of his ninety-

Revolutionary poems.

eight years an ultra-liberal of the French revolutionary school. The democratic poets of this century — men like Landor, Shelley, Hugo, Swinburne — often are to be found among those of patrician birth and culture. Swinburne, as if tired of art followed for its own sake, threw his soul into the struggle of the French and Italian patriots. *A Song of Italy* is marked by sonorous eloquence, and carries us buoyantly along; yet, despite its splendid apostrophes to Mazzini and Garibaldi, it was not a poem to be widely received and to stir the common heart. It appeals to the lover of high poetry rather than to votaries of the cause. The *Ode on the French Republic* was less worthy of the author, and not equal to its occasion. It bears the stamp of work composed for a special event as plainly as some of Southey's or Wordsworth's laureate odes. We may apply to it a portion of Swinburne's own censure of a far nobler poem, Lowell's "Commemoration Ode," of which many an isolated line is worth more to a great nation than the whole French ode can ever be to them that love France. *Songs before Sunrise* may be taken as the crowning effort of the author during the period just named. It is a series of lofty and imposing odes, exhibiting Swinburne's varied lyrical powers and his most earnest traits of character. The conflict of day with night before the sunrise of freedom is rehearsed in twoscore pieces, which chant the democratic uprising of Continental Europe and the outbreak in Crete. Grouped together, the effect is that of a strong symphonic movement; yet much of it is tumultuous and ineffective. The prolonged earnestness fags the reader, and helps a cause less than might some popular lyric or soldier's hymn. A trace of the spas-

"A Song of Italy," 1867.

"Ode on the French Republic," 1870.

"Songs before Sunrise," 1871.

modic manner injures much of Swinburne's revolutionary verse. Yet here are powerful single poems: "The Watch in the Night," "Hertha," the "Hymn of Man," and "Perinde ac Cadaver." "Hertha" rates high among the author's pieces, having so much lyric force and music united with condensed and clarified thought. "The Eve of Revolution" is like the sound of a trumpet, and charged with fiery imagination, a fit companion-piece to Coleridge's finest ode.

No marked passion for nature.

In Swinburne's poems we do not perceive the love of nature which was so passionate an element in the spirit and writings of Shelley, that exile from the hearts and households of his fellow-men. Were he compelled to follow art as a means of subsistence and to suit his work to the market, it would be more condensed and practical, yet would, I think, lose something of its essential flavor. After all, he has been an industrious man of letters, devoted to literature as a matter of love and religion. The exhaustive essays upon Blake and Chapman, his various prefaces and annotations, and his criticisms of Arnold, Morris, and Hugo, among other professional labors, are fresh in mind. The prose, like the poetry, is unflagging and impetuous beyond that of other men. No modern writer, save De Quincey, has sustained himself so easily and with such cumulative force through passages which strain the reader's mental power. His organ of expression is so developed that no exercise of it seems to produce brain-weariness, and he does not realize that others are subject to that kind of fatigue.

Critical and other prose essays.

He rarely takes up the critical pen unless to pay honor to a work he admires, or to confront some foe with dangerous satire and wrath. His language is so

A brilliant and original, but not always judicial mind.

enthusiastic that it does not always convince; in fact, his rhetoric and generous partisanship lessen his judicial authority. His writings often are too learned. Scholarship is a second nature with him; he is not obscure, like Browning, but his allusions are so familiar to himself that he cannot bring them to the level of popular comprehension. Nor can he, however laudatory of the masters he affected in youth, look upon other modern poets except with the complacency felt by one who listens to a stranger's rude handling of the native tongue. His command of verse is so beyond that of any other Briton, that poets of different grades must seem to him pretty much alike, and their relative gifts scarcely worth distinguishing. By the law of attractions I should expect to see him interested in verse of the most bald and primeval form. Many excel him in humor, simplicity, range of inventive power. But contend with him in rhythm, and, though you are Thor himself, you are trying to drain the horn of which one end is open to the sea.

"Under the Microscope," 1872.

While recognizing his thorough honesty, I do not assent to his judgment of American poets. In *Under the Microscope* he pays a tribute to Poe, and has a just understanding of the merits and defects of Whitman. His denunciation of all the rest, as either mocking-birds in their adherence to models, or corn-crakes in the harshness and worthlessness of their original song, results, it is plain, not from prejudice, but from ignorance of the atmosphere which pervades American life. A poet must sing for his own people. Whitman, for instance, well and boldly avows himself the mouthpiece of our democratic nationality. Aside from the unconscious formalism that injures his poems, and which Swinburne has pointed out, he has

Thoughtless estimate of American poets.

done what he could, and we acknowledge the justice shown to one, at least, of our representative men. But to cite other examples, — and a few are enough for this digression, — if Swinburne thoroughly understood the deep religious sentiment, the patriotism, the tender aspiration, of the best American homes, he would perceive that our revered Whittier had fairly expressed these emotions; would comprehend the national affection which discerns quality even in his faults, and originality and music in his fervent strains. And if he could feel the mighty presence of American woods and waters, he would see how simply and grandly the author of "Thanatopsis," "A Forest Hymn," and "The Night Journey of a River," had communed with nature, and acknowledge the Doric strength and purity of his imaginative verse. Our figure-school is but lately founded; landscape-art and sentiment have had to precede it; but, again, cannot even a foreign critic find in poems like Lowell's "The Courtin'" an idyllic truth that Theocritus might rejoice in, all that can be made of the New England dialect, and pictures full of sweetness and feeling? Of this much I am confident, and this much will serve. America is not all frontier, and her riper thought and life are reflected in her literature. Our poets may avail themselves of "the glory that was Greece" with as much justice and originality as any British minstrel. The artist claims all subjects, times, and places for his own. Bryant, Emerson, Whittier, Lowell, Longfellow, — to cite no lesser or younger names, — are esteemed by a host of their countrymen who can read between the lines; their poems are the music of a land to which British authors now must look for the largest and ever-growing portion of their

own constituency. Each one of these poets as truly represents his country as any of their comrades who secure foreign attention by claiming a special prerogative in this office.

IV.

"Chastelard," 1865.

To return to *Chastelard*, which appeared close after "Atalanta," but in order of composition, as I have said, is known to have preceded the classical drama. The latter poem seemed flooded with moonlight, but "Chastelard" is warm-blooded and modern, charged with lurid passion and romance. As a historical tragedy it was a direct test of the dramatic powers of the author, and it is as a dramatic poet that he must be chiefly regarded. In this play we see the ripening of the genius that in youth produced "The Queen Mother," and to me it has far more interest than Swinburne's political lyrics. Mary Stuart and her "four Maries" are the women of the piece; Chastelard, her minstrel-lover, and Darnley, the leading men; Knox, who is to figure so grandly in another and greater work, drifts as a gloomy and portentous shadow across the scene. The poem opens with an exquisitely light French song of the period. A fine romantic flavor, smacking of the "dance and Provençal song," pervades the interludes of the tragedy. The interest centres in the charm wrought by Mary upon Chastelard, although he knows the cruelty of one who toys with him while her ambition suffers him to be put to death. The dungeon-scene, in which he foregoes the Queen's pardon, is very powerful. Swinburne may almost be said to have *discovered* Mary Stuart. Upon his conception of her character

A romantic historical drama.

The poet's conception of Mary Stuart.

he lavishes his strength; she becomes the historic parallel of the Gothic Venus, loving love rather than her lover, full of passion, full of softness and beauty, full of caprice, vengeance, and deceit. She says of herself: —

> "Nay, dear, I have
> No tears in me; I never shall weep much,
> I think, in all my life; I have wept for wrath
> Sometimes, and for mere pain, but for love's pity
> I cannot weep at all. I would to God
> You loved me less; I give you all I can
> For all this love of yours, and yet I am sure
> I shall live out the sorrow of your death
> And be glad afterwards."

Yet this royal Lamia, when with a lover (and she never is without one), is so much passion's slave as to invite risks which certainly will be the death of her favorite, and possibly her own ruin. In depicting her as she moves through the historic changes of her life Swinburne has fortunately chosen a theme well suited to him. Mary Beaton, who in secret adores Chastelard, serves as a foil to the Queen, and is an equally resolute character. The execution scene is strongly managed, with thrilling dialogue between this Mary and Mary Carmichael; at the end room is made for my lord of Bothwell, next the Queen. Though alive with poetry and passion, this play, like "Atalanta," is restrained within artistic bounds. It has less mannerism than we find in most of the author's early style. The chief personages are drawn strongly and distinctly, and the language of the Scottish citizens, burgesses, courtiers, etc., is true to the matter and the time. The whole play is intensely emotional, the scenes and dialogue are vigorously conceived, and it must be owned that "Chastelard"

Choice of theme.

was a remarkable essay for a poet of Swinburne's age at the date of its production.

"Bothwell," 1874.

Nevertheless, youth is the time to feel, and therefore for a poet to illustrate, the extreme abandonment of delirious but unselfish passion. The second and greater portion of the Stuart trilogy required a man to write it. Now that almost a decade of creative and somewhat tempestuous experience has strengthened, calmed, and otherwise perfected Swinburne's faculties, he completes the grand historical poem of *Bothwell;* a prodigious work in every way, — possibly the longest five-act drama ever written, and, at least, longer than any whose power and interest have not given out before the close. The time has not yet come to determine its place in English literature. But I agree with them who declare that Swinburne, by this massive and heroic composition, has placed himself in the front line of our poets; that no one can be thought his superior in true dramatic power. The work not only is large, but written in a large manner. It seems deficient in contrasts, especially needing the relief which humor, song and by-play afford to a tragic plot. But it is a great historical poem, cast in a dramatic rather than epic form, for the sake of stronger analysis and dialogue. Considered as a dramatic epic, it has no parallel, and is replete with proofs of laborious study and faithful use of the rich materials afforded by the theme. Artistically speaking, this painstaking has checked the movement; even so free and ardent a genius is hampered by scholarship, on which Jonson prided himself, though imagination served Shakespeare's turn.

The author in the front rank of modern dramatic poets.

"Bothwell," an epic in dramatic form.

On the other hand, "Bothwell" is a genuine contribution to history. The subject has grown upon

the poet. This section of the trilogy is many times the length of "Chastelard." "Things, now, that bear a weighty and a serious brow" are set before the reader. Great affairs of state hang at poise; Rizzio, Darnley, Murray, Gordon, Knox, Bothwell, and the Queen are made to live or die in our presence, and the most of them are tangled in a red and desperate coil. Mary's character has hardened; she has grown more reckless, fuller of evil passion, and now is not only a murderess by implication, but, outraged by the slaughter of Rizzio, becomes a murderess in fact. The sum of her iniquities is recounted by Knox in his preachment to the citizens of Edinburgh. That wonderful harangue seems to me the most sustained and characteristic passage in modern verse; but even this Mary Stuart, who "washed her feet" in the blood of her lovers, — even she has found her tamer in the brutal and ruthless Bothwell, who towers like a black demon throughout the play. Nevertheless, amid her cruelties and crimes, we discover, from her very self-abandonment to the first really strong man she has met, that her falseness has been the reaction of a fine nature warped and degraded by the feeble creatures hitherto imposed upon her. Such love as she had for the beautiful was given to her poet and her musician, to Chastelard and Rizzio; but only the virile and heroic can fully satisfy her own nature and master it for good or evil. Under certain auspices, from her youth up, she might have been a paragon of love, sovereignty, and womanhood.

The Queen of Scots.

Among the various notable passages in this drama are: the death of Rizzio, the scenes before and after the murder of Darnley, the interviews between Bothwell and Mary in Hermitage Castle and elsewhere,

Notable passages and scenes.

the populace harangued by Knox; finally, the closing speech of the Queen to Mary Beaton, whose sinister avowal,

"But I will never leave you till you die!"

connects the entire plot with that ominous future, whose story, ever deepening in gloom, has yet to make the trilogy complete. "Bothwell" exhibits no excess but that of length, and no mannerism; on the contrary, a superb manner, and a ripe, pure, and majestic style. To show the strength, richness, and dramatic variety of Swinburne's mature language, let us take a few extracts from the dialogue of this historical play, with its threescore personages and as many shifting scenes. The first portrays the soldier, Bothwell: —

Bothwell.

"*Queen.* Does your wound pain you?
Bothwell. What, I have a wound?
Queen. How should one love enough, though she gave all,
Who had your like to love? I pray you tell me,
How did you fight?
Bothwell. Why, what were this to tell?
I caught this riever, by some chance of God,
That put his death into mine hand, alone,
And charged him; foot to foot we fought some space,
And he fought well; a gallant knave, God wot,
And worth a sword for better soldier's work
Than these thieves' brawls; I would have given him life
To ride among mine own men here and serve,
But he would nought; so being sore hurt i' the thigh,
I pushed upon him suddenly, and clove
His crown through to the chin."

Mary.

The second is from the lips of Mary, shut up in Lochleven Castle: —

"*Queen.* Ay, we were fools, we Maries twain, and thought
To be into the summer back again

And see the broom blow in the golden world,
The gentle broom on hill. For all men's talk
And all things come and gone yet, yet I find
I am not tired of that I see not here,
The sun, and the large air, and the sweet earth,
And the hours that hum like fire-flies on the hills
As they burn out and die, and the bowed heaven,
And the small clouds that swim and swoon i' the sun,
And the small flowers."

Lastly, a few powerful lines from Knox's terrific indictment of the Queen: — *John Knox.*

"*John Knox.* . . . . . Then shall one say,
Seeing these men also smitten, as ye now
Seeing them that bled before to do her good,
God is not mocked; and ye shall surely know
What men were these and what man he that spake
The things I speak now prophesying, and said
That if ye spare to shed her blood for shame,
For fear or pity of her great name or face,
God shall require of you the innocent blood
Shed for her fair face' sake, and from your hands
Wring the price forth of her blood-guiltiness."

. . . . . "Her reign and end
Shall be like Athaliah's, as her birth
Was from the womb of Jezebel, that slew
The prophets, and made foul with blood and fire
The same land's face that now her seed makes foul
With whoredoms and with witchcrafts; yet they say
Peace, where is no peace, while the adulterous blood
Feeds yet with life and sin the murderous heart
That hath brought forth a wonder to the world
And to all time a terror; and this blood
The hands are clean that shed, and they that spare
In God's just sight spotted as foul as Cain's."

The exceptions taken against poems of Swinburne's youth will not hold in respect to this fine production. The most serious charge that can be brought is that

Length of this poem.

of its undue length, and as to this the judgments of different readers will be as various as their temperaments. "Bothwell" is a work for vigorous minds, and to such it must always seem the bloom of beauty and power. I think it would be fortunate if some new outlet of expression could be made for the dramatic spirit of our time. Men like Browning and Swinburne do not readily become playwrights; the stage now requires of a drama that it shall be written in sparkling prose or the lightest of verse, and, of the author, cleverness and ingenuity rather than poetic greatness. It would not injure this writer to shape his work for a direct hearing, to be restricted by the limits of an arbitrary system; but might have upon these historical tragedies a gracious effect like that which resulted from the antique method applied to his "Atalanta." Ritualism, the bane of less prolific natures, is what such a man need not fear. Ease of circumstances has not made an amateur of this artist and enthusiast; nevertheless, in his case, the benefits of professional independence are nearly balanced by the ills.

Restraint an element of perfect art.

V.

See page 1.

TAINE brings a great cloud of examples to show that each period shapes the work and fortunes of its authors, but it is equally true that men of genius create new modes, and often determine the nature of periods yet to come. Swinburne may live to see the time and himself in correspondence. To me he seems the foremost of the younger school of British poets. The fact that a man is not yet haloed with the light that comes only when, in death or in hoary age, he

recalls to us the past, need not debar him from full recognition. A critic must be quick to estimate the present. For some years, as I have observed the successive efforts of this poet, a feeling of his genius has grown upon me, derived not only from his promise, but from what he actually has done. If he were to write no more, and his past works should be collected in a single volume, — although, as in the remains of Shelley, we might find little narrative-verse, what a world of melody, and what a wealth of imaginative song! It is true that his well-known manner would pervade the book; we should find no great variety of mood, few studies of visible objects, a meagre reflection of English life as it exists to-day. Yet a subtile observer would perceive how truly he represents his own time, and to a poet this compendium would become a lyrical hand-book, a treasured exposition of creative and beautiful design.

Amount and richness of the work already accomplished by this poet.

Acknowledging the presence of true genius, minor objections are of small account. A poet may hold himself apart, or from caprice may do things unworthy of his noblest self, but we think of him always as at his best. The gift is not so common; let us value it while it is here. Let us also do justice to the world, — to the world that, remembering its past errors, no longer demands of great wits that they should wholly forego madness. Fifty years ago, and Swinburne, for his eccentricities and disdain, might have been an exile like Byron and Shelley, or, for his republicanism, imprisoned like Leigh Hunt. We have learned that poets gather from strange experiences what they teach in song. If rank unwholesome flowers spring from too rich a soil, in the end a single fruitful blossoming will compensate us

Genius to be measured at its best.

Application.

for the sterile *fleurs du mal* of youth. Lastly, Swinburne has been said to lack application, but ten years of profuse and consecutive labors refute the charge. Works like his are not produced without energy and long industrious hours. If done at a heat, the slow hidden fire has never ceased its burning. Who shall dictate to a poet his modes and tenses, or his choice of work? But all this matters nothing; the entire host of traditional follies need not abash us if, with their coming, we have a revival of the olden passion and the olden power.

Retrospective summary.

The Georgian era: 1790–1824.

DURING the Georgian era a romantic sentimentalism, exalted to passion in the utterance of Byron, was the dominating spirit of British verse. The more subtile but slowly maturing influence of the Lake school, and that of the idealists Shelley and Keats, did not lay firm hold upon the immediate generation. Their effect was not wholly apparent until the beginning of our own time. Nevertheless, a few poets, among whom Hunt and Procter were notable, extended it over a transition period, and finally saw it become a general and potent force. The reader now has observed the technical finish, the worship of pure beauty, and the revival of classical taste, discernible, before the work of Keats, in the artistic method of Landor, — a poet who so recently ended his career. These constituents, more fully developed by the exquisite genius of Keats, were to mark the outward features of English metrical literature during the refined era whose poets have been included under this review; whose spirit, moreover, suggested that contemplative method which rose to imagination in the high discourse of Wordsworth,

A transition period.

Victorian poets.

and too often sinks to didacticism in the perplexed and timorous strains of his disciples.

After passion, — reflection, taste, repose; and such have been the qualities displayed by numbers of the Victorian poets in the contemplation of beauty and knowledge, and in the production of their composite verse. At last a Neo-Romantic school, of which Browning and Rossetti have been leaders, is engaged in a nervous effort to reunite beauty and passion in rhythmical art. Swinburne, beyond the rest, having carried expression to its farthest extreme, obeys a healthful impulse, seeking to renew the true dramatic vigor and thus begin another cycle of creative song. Even Tennyson, in the mellow ripeness of his fame, perceives that the mission of the idyllist is ended, and extends to the latest movement his adherence and practical aid. Going outside his special genius and life-long wont, he now — through sheer intellectual force, and the skill made perfect by fifty years of practice — has composed, with deliberate forethought and consummate art, a drama that does not belie the name. Without much imaginative splendor, it is at least objective and adapted to the fitness of things, and thus essentially different from Browning's essays toward a revival of the dramatic mould. On the other hand, it also differs from the work of the Elizabethan dramatists, in that it is the result of a forced effort, while the models after which it is shaped were in their day an intuitive form of expression, — the natural outgrowth of a thoroughly dramatic age. The very effort, however, is alike honorable to England's Laureate and significant of the present need. Wisdom, beauty, and passion — a blended trinity — constitute the poetic strength of every imaginative era, and memorably that of Shake-

The present situation and outlook.

Tennyson's drama: "Queen Mary," 1875.

See page 191.

The constituents of great dramatic verse.

speare's time. So long as the true critic's faith, hope, and charity abide (and the greatest of these is charity), he will justify every well-timed, masterly effort to recall the triune spirit of Britain's noblest and most enduring song.

[END OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT.]

TWELVE YEARS LATER.

A SUPPLEMENTARY REVIEW.

1887.

Limits of the typical Victorian Period.

WITH respect to the poetry of Great Britain, the fancy may be indulged that this year's festivals not only celebrate the rounding of a brilliant and distinct period, but stand for a kind of Secular Games as well. It is just a century since Burns and Coleridge and Wordsworth were in the joy of that new dawn, when

> "To be young was very heaven";

and no other land than theirs, meanwhile, has shown a more unbroken procession of imaginative poets. There was a brief nooning between the early and later rehearsals, but the music of great voices has never wholly stopped. This still is heard, though more than a decade of years ago it seemed, and rightly, as if the typical Victorian era were complete. But in the summer of the North the last hours of a day whose wings of light come near to touching its successor's, — although the winds fall and the chief workers mostly go to rest, — have a lustre of their own. The survival of influences that long since became historic is a chance coincidence with the prolongation of a fortunate reign, and due to veteran leaders whose strength has been more than equal to their day.

Survival of its leaders.

Tennyson and Browning, although two generations of younger men pay homage to them, have been, with the exception of Swinburne, the most unflagging poets of the recent interval. Moreover, — and maugre the flings of wits who judge them by trifles and failures, and who neither care for nor comprehend their important work, — they have given us much that is up to the standard of their prime. In no respect have they been superannuated or piping out of date, — little as they have had to do with the jest and prettiness, the vivacious experiments, with which youth busies itself ere an hour comes for serious attention to the conduct of a new movement.

Its specific characteristics.

Yet if literary eras, like those of Elizabeth and Anne, are characterized by a special style or spirit, that for which the Victorian is already historic, on its poetic side, results from certain idyllic and reflective tendencies, with their interblendings and outgrowths. It ceased to be dominant before 1875, going off, as I pointed out, into æsthetic neo-Romanticism on the one hand, and a sub-dramatic or psychological method on the other. If life may be judged by its mature and most prolonged activities, the Victorian school will be recognized as we have recognized it. It is beyond ordinary precedent that its two chief poets are still in voice, and still pre-eminent. Of Browning it may be said that he has bided his time, and now is the master of an enthusiastic following. But even Tennyson has charged his later idyls with passion, and succeeded in making at least his lyrics dramatic. On the technical side, recent craftsmen take their cue from the forms, melody, color, of Swinburne and Rossetti. What differs and is strictly novel, though much in vogue,

seldom aspires to the higher range in which these elder leaders have moved almost alone.

The poet's horoscope.

The conjectural length of a poet's life doubtless is not yet reckoned in the tables of insurance actuaries. But the longevity of modern poets really seems to have been governed by their mental cast. The romancers, and the lyrists of great sensibility or intense experience, quicken their heart-beats and often have died young. Many poets of "self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control," whose intellect is the regulator of well-ordered lives, have lived long: such men as Emerson and Longfellow in America — as Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning in England. The recent drift — and they have strengthened it — has been toward the rule of intellect over passion, and the brain-power of such masters has maintained them in wonderful vitality and productiveness to an advanced age.

Two noble kinsmen.

However this may be, the most suggestive portion of the record now before us is that concerned with the last-named poets. England alone can now boast of two so equal in years and fame, yet so distinct in genius, and still producing works unsurpassed by the efforts of their juniors. Like two brave galleys they still head the fleet, and with all sails spread, though the mists of an unknown sea are straight before them. As for the Laureate, all England knows him by heart. Successive ranks of generous and cultured youths have doted on his works, so that his gradual age is watched and understood, somewhat as in a family the bodily and mental changes of its revered master are observed by the household. At times his verse, and oftener than that of his more dramatic compeer's, has sprung from sudden

outbursts of feeling, and never more so than in the fine heat and choler of his later years. New readers may not comprehend these moods, but they are intelligible to those who have owed him so much in the past, and do not affect our judgment of his long career.

I.

Tennyson. Cf. Chaps. V., VI.

A good deal of force has been expended by the Laureate to disprove the claim that he would not greatly excel as a dramatist for either the closet or the stage. His mental and constructive gifts are such that, if he had begun as a "writer of plays," he doubtless would have been successful, — but never, I believe, could have reached his present eminence.

His dramatic efforts. Cf. pp. 191, 413.

His first drama, "Queen Mary," seemed to confirm an early prediction that he might yet produce a tolerable work of that kind, though only by a *tour de force*. Since then, through strong will and persistency, he has composed a succession of dramas, historical and romantic; but neither will nor judgment, nor the ambition to prove his mastery of the highest and most inclusive form of literature, has enabled him in the afternoon of life to triumph as a dramatist. The first actor of England, with matchless resources for theatrical presentation, was able more than once to make the performance of a play by Tennyson a notable and picturesque event, but nothing more; nor have those produced with equal care by others become any part of the stage repertory.

Minor Plays.

There are charmingly poetic qualities in the minor pieces, and one of them, "The Cup," is not without effects, — but even this will not hold the stage, — while "The Falcon" and "The Promise of May" are

plainly amateurish. They contain lovely songs and trifles, but when a great master merges the poet in the playwright he must be judged accordingly. *Harold* and *Becket* are of a more imposing cast, and have significance as examples of what may — and of what may not — be effected by a strong artist in a department to which he is not led by compulsive instinct. Their ancestral themes are in every way worthy of an English poet. "Harold," in style and language, is much like the Idyls of the King, nor does it greatly surpass them in dramatic quality, though a work cast in the standard five-act mould. There is a strong scene where the last of the Saxon kings is forced to swear allegiance to William of Normandy. As a whole, the work is conventional, its battle-scenes reminiscent of Shakespeare and Scott, and the diction tinged with the author's old mannerisms. "Becket," seven years later, is his nearest approach to a dramatic masterpiece, and at a different time might have ranged itself in stage-literature. It is quite superior, as such, to pieces by Talfourd, Knowles, etc., that are still revived; but this is poor praise indeed for one of Tennyson's fame, and assuredly not worth trying for. It must be admitted that years of self-abstraction, of intimacy with books and nature, are not likely to develop the gift of even a born novelist or dramatic poet. Human life is his proper study: his task the expression of its struggle, passion, mirth and sorrow, virtue and crime, — and these must be transcribed by one that has been whirled in their eddies or who observes them very closely from the shore.

Tragedies.

"*Harold*," 1876.

"*Becket*," 1884.

In striking contrast, Tennyson's recent lyrical poetry is the afterglow of a still radiant genius. Here

Lyrical Verse.

we see undimmed the fire and beauty of his natural gift, and wisdom increased with age. What a collection, short as it is, forms the volume of *Ballads* issued in his seventy-first year! It opens with the thoroughly English story of "The First Quarrel," with its tragic culmination, —

"*Ballads, and Other Poems,*" 1880.

> "And the boat went down that night, — the boat went down that night!"

Country life is what he has observed, and he reflects it with truth of action and dialect. "The Northern Cobbler" and "The Village Wife" could be written only by the idyllist whose Yorkshire ballads delighted us in 1866. But here are greater things, two or three at his highest mark. The passion and lyrical might of "Rizpah" never have been exceeded by the author, nor, I think, by any other poet of his day. "The Revenge" and "Lucknow" are magnificent ballads. "Sir John Oldcastle" and "Columbus" are not what Browning would have made of them; but, again, "The Voyage of Maeldune" is a weird and vocal fantasy, unequally poetic, with the well-known touch in every number. Five years later another book of purely Tennysonian ballads appeared. Its title-piece, *Tiresias*, may be classed with "Lucretius" and "Tithonus," yet scarcely equals the one as a study, or the other for indefinable poetic charm. "The Wreck" and "Despair" are full of power, and there are two more of the unique dialect-pieces, "To-morrow" and "The Spinster's Sweet-'arts." A final Arthurian idyl, "Balin and Balan," is below the level of the work whose bulk it enlarges. "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade," much inferior to the Balaklavan lyric, shows that will can-

"*Tiresias, and Other Poems,*" 1885.

not supply the heat excited by a thrilling and instant occasion.

A poem in this volume, "The Ancient Sage," consists of speculations on the Nameless, — and on the universal question which presents itself ever more strenuously as life's shadows lengthen. In this sense, it is of kin to Browning's "Ferishtah" and "Jochannan Hakkadosh." Still more noteworthy is the impetuous elegiac "Vastness," written in 1885, and as yet not placed in a collection. The persiflage bestowed upon this, and afterward, in various quarters, upon the second *Locksley Hall*, proclaimed the rise of a generation not wonted to the poet's habit of speech; more, it revealed one out of patience with its creeds, and consoling itself by avoiding resolute thought upon what confronts and challenges our mortality. Tennyson, smitten by the death of a friend, reflects that not here alone dear faces steadily vanish, — but

> "Many a planet by many a sun may roll with the dust of a vanish'd race."

In the knowledge of this, what are all our politics, turmoil, love, ambition, but "a trouble of ants in the gleam of a million million of suns"? What is it all, forsooth, if at last we end,

> "Swallowed in Vastness, lost in Silence, drown'd in the deeps of a meaningless Past"?

As was natural, the sequel to "Locksley Hall" was received with more than curiosity — with a certain philosophical interest. I do not see that it is out of temper with that fervid chant which, forty-five years before, seized upon all young hearts and caught the ear of the world. Here is the same protest against

"*Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*," 1886.

The poet's youth and age.

conditions: in youth, a revolt from convention and class-tyranny; in age, a protest against lawlessness and irreverence. The poet now as then resists the main grievance — but with an old man's increased petulance of speech. His after-song does not wreak itself upon the master passions of love and ambition, and hence fastens less strongly on the thoughts of the young; nor does it come with the unused rhythm, the fresh and novel cadence, that stamped the now hackneyed measure with a lyric's name. Yet, as to its art and imagery, the same effects are there, differing only in a more vigorous method, an intentional roughness, from the individual early verse. The new burthen is termed pessimistic, but for all its impatient summary of ills, it ends with a cry of faith. And so ends "Vastness": —

> "Peace, let it be! for I loved him, and love him forever: the dead are not dead but alive."

If Browning is more intelligibly an optimist, it is because he studies mankind from a scientific point of view, keeping his own temper and spirits withal. He has a more abiding and "saving faith" in the immanence of a beneficent ruling power. Both these poets have deepened and widened their outlook: the one listens to the roll of the ages, and marks the courses of the stars; the other pierces the soul, to find the secret of a universe in the microcosm, man. Tennyson is the more impressed by that science which observes the astronomic and cosmic whole of nature, while biology and psychology are anticipated by Browning and subjected to his usufruct.

When the laureate was raised to the peerage — a station which he twice declined in middle life — he

Created Baron Tennyson of Aldworth, Surrey, and Farringford, Freshwater, Isle of Wight, Jan. 24, 1884.

gained some attention from the satirists, and his acceptance of rank no doubt was honestly bemoaned by many sturdy radicals. It is difficult, nevertheless, to find any violation of principle or taste in the receipt by England's favorite and official poet of such an honor, bestowed at the climax of his years and fame. Republicans should bear in mind that the republic of letters is the only one to which Alfred Tennyson owed allegiance; that he was the "first citizen" of an ancient monarchy, which honored letters by gratefully conferring upon him its high traditional award. It would be truckling for an American, loyal to his own form of government, to receive an aristocratic title from some foreign potentate. Longfellow, for example, promptly declined an order tendered him by the king of Italy. But a sense of fitness, and even patriotism, should make it easy for an Englishman, faithful to a constitutional monarchy, to accept any well-earned dignity under that system. In every country it is thought worth while for one to be the founder of his family; and in Great Britain no able man could do more for descendants, to whom he is not sure of bequeathing his talents, than by handing down a class-privilege, even though it confers no additional glory upon the original winner. Extreme British democrats, who openly or covertly wish to change the form of government, and even communists, are aware that Tennyson does not belong to their ranks. He has been, as I long since wrote, a liberal conservative: liberal in humanity and progressive thought, strictly conservative in allegiance to the national system. As for that, touch but the territory, imperil the institutions, of Great Britain, and Swinburne himself — the pupil of Landor, Maz-

zini, and Hugo — betrays the blood in his veins. Tennyson, a liberal of the Maurice group, has been cleverly styled by Whitman a "poet of feudalism"; he is a celebrator of the past, of sovereignty and knighthood; he is no lost leader, "just for a ribbon" leaving some gallant cause forsworn or any song unsung. In all fairness, his acceptance of rank savors less of inconsistency than does the logic of those who rail at the world for neglect of genius, and then upbraid them both for coming to an understanding.

"This laurel greener."

As a final word about Lord Tennyson, a laureate of thirty-seven years' service, it may be said that no predecessor has filled his office with fewer lapses from the quality of a poet. Southey's patriotic rubbish was no better, and not much worse, than his verse at large. Wordsworth, during the few years of his incumbency, wrote little official verse. Tennyson has freshened the greenness of the laurel; a vivid series of national odes and ballads is the result of his journey as its wearer. That some of his perfunctory salutations and pæans have been failures, notably the Jubilee ode of the current year, is evidence that genius does not always obey orders. The Wellington ode, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the dedications of "In Memoriam" and the "Idyls," and such noble ballads as those of "Grenville," "The Revenge," "Lucknow" — these are his vouchers for the wreath, and, whether inspired by it or not, are henceforth a secure portion of his country's song.

II.

Browning. Cp. Chap. IX.

OLD lovers of Tennyson feel that he is best understood by those who grew up with his poems, and

profited by his advance to the mature art and power of "In Memoriam" and the four chief "Idyls." Browning began and continued in quite another way. A neophyte might as well get hold of his middle-life work, and thence read backward and forward. If one prefers to gain an introduction to the author of *The Inn Album* from a sustained poem, rather than from his lyrics, nothing better could be chosen than that nervous, coherent work, the first in date of his productions during the time we are considering. I recall its effect upon one or two of my younger friends, who ascribe to it their first sense of those profound emotions which set the spirit free. Seldom is there a work more inwrought with characterization, fateful gathering, intense human passion, tragic action to which the realistic scene and manners serve as heightening foils, than this thrilling epic of men and women whose destinies are compressed within a single day. The tragedy ends with the death of two sinners, whose souls are first laid bare. No one of Browning's works is better proportioned, or less sophisticated in diction, — the latter, in truth, being never suffered to divert attention from the movement and interest of this electric novel in verse. It was quickly followed by a various little book, *Pacchiarotto*. The poet now turns upon his critics, with countering satire and a defense of his hardy methods; but he welcomes, in title-piece and epilogue, "friends who are sound" to his Thirty-Four Port, promising "nettlebroth" galore to the feeble and maudlin. Of the shorter efforts, "A Forgiveness" displays to the full his dramatic and psychological mastery. Its verse is modeled with the strong right hand that painted "My Last Duchess," to which it is in all respects a vigorous companion-piece.

"The Inn Album," 1875.

"Pacchiarotto, and How He worked in Distemper," 1876.

Agamemnon of Æschylus, 1877.

A third translation from the Greek drama, the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus, is marked by fidelity to the text, gained through a free disregard of English idiom, but scarcely has the sweetness and grace of "Balaustion" and "Aristophanes' Apology."

"La Saisiaz," etc., 1878.

The volume entitled *La Saisiaz: The Two Poets of Croisic*, like "The Inn Album," commends itself to lay readers, being direct and forcible, with abundant food for thought. The opening poem, in the "Locksley Hall" measure, bravely considers the problem of mortal and immortal life. Its successor reeks with humorous wisdom, irony, knowledge of the world. An ideal lyric supplements them, inscribed to the woman whose aid to the writer's song is symbolized by the cricket's note that helped out a minstrel's tune when his lyre had broken a string. But the finest and richest display of Browning's triune lyrical, narrative, and analytical vigor, which he has given us since the memorable "Dramatic Lyrics" and "Men and Women," is found in the series of *Dramatic Idyls*. These silence critical complaint of the neglect or dilution of Browning's original genius. The most impressive of the metrical tales are "Martin Ralph," "Clive" — a marvelous evocation, and "Ned Bratts" — a Holbeinish conjecture of the effect on a dull brutish hind of Bunyan's teachings. "Pheidippides," a figure of the Athenian runner with news from Marathon, is superb, and "Doctor ——" quite unapproachable for jest and satire. The story of "Muyléykeh" and his Arab steed is already a classic. Always throughout these vivid impersonations, as in "Ivan Ivanovitch" and "Pietro of Albano," the magician's supreme intent is to reveal

"Dramatic Idyls": 1st Series, 1879. 2d Series, 1880.

"What 's under lock and key —
Man's soul!"

Jocoseria, made up of brief and sturdy poems, illustrates again the author's habit of exploration through all literatures for his texts and themes. After the grim, pathetic ballad of "Donald" and the grimmer "Christina and Monaldeschi," we have in "Jochannan Hakkadosh" the vital lessons of the book. The Rabbi and the pupils, who find his sayings hard indeed, are no inapt types of our modern poet and his circle. As in "Paracelsus," Browning's favorite theorem continues to be the soul's real victory achieved in the apparent failures of earthly life. His latter years are given more and more to the consideration of eternal rather than temporal questions. Under the guise of a Dervish he proffers, in *Ferishtah's Fancies*, a sum of hopeful wisdom as to the meaning of existence, the goodness of the Creator. The thought, like all great thought, is simple, yet put so subtle-wise as to make it well that our latter-day Solomon has the fame that tempts a world to study the riddling homilies of his old age. To those who balk thereat no comfort is vouchsafed except such as they find in "Pambo" of the preceding volume, — for he still merrily "offends with his tongue," though clearly an interpreter of the purest theistic spirit of our time. My brief references to Browning's plenteous aftermath close with his *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*. His intellect disports itself more than ever in these half dozen citations of far-away personages whom he raises from the dead at will. The work is capricious enough, but he does not forget, in the most rugged and obscure passages, to give us inter-

"*Jocoseria*," 1883.

"*Ferishtah's Fancies*," 1884.

"*Parleyings*," *etc.*, 1887.

ludes that prove his voice still unimpaired. "Gerard de Lareise" is smooth and delicate enough for a fastidious ear, with rare bits of song included, and music itself receives expert attention in "Charles Avison." The prologue and epilogue of this book are not its least essential matters. All in all, however, it is not so ultimate and satisfactory as one could desire. At whatever worth he may rate the clubs of quidnuncs associated to study him, he does not disdain to make riddles for them, as in the Prelude, and to choose remote, obscure topics for their discussion — somewhat as the wizard Michael Scott, compelled to supply tasks for his familiar, succeeded at last by ordering him to make ropes out of sea-sand. He is right in affording them no special clews, for that which, written in verse, can be conveyed as well by a paraphrase certainly is not poetry.

Browning's use of rhyme:

Most of the foregoing work, so varied and affluent, is in rhymed verse. Great respect is paid to the observance of the rhyme, even though meaning and measure halt for it. Whitman's Hebraic chant, often vibrating with rhythmical harmony, is the outcome of a belief that rhymes are hackneyed and trivial; and as Browning's rhymes are not seldom forced and artificial to a degree reached by no other master, the question is asked why he should rhyme at all, why he does not confine himself to his typical blank-verse and other free-hand measures.

— Its cause and effect.

To this it might be replied that he was born a poet, with the English lyrical ear and accentual instinct; that he rhymes by nature, and exquisitely, as we see from all his simpler melodies, and that he is not the man to slight an intuitive note of expres-

sion. With all his headlong tyranny over restraints of form, an adherence to rhyme, as in the case of Swinburne, is "a brake upon his speech"; otherwise his fluency, although the result of endlessly changeful thought, would quite outleap the effective limits of art. That the brakes creak and groan is a proof they are doing their work. But what of his involved and parenthetical style? A rule concerning language is that it has power to formulate not only problems of absolute geometry, but those of imaginative thought; and clearness of style has been a grace of the first poets and thinkers. When Browning's tangled syntax is involuntary, it may denote a struggling process of thought, for the style is the man. But, in defense of such of these "hard readings" as seem voluntary and of aforethought, we call to mind the oriental feeling that truth is most oracular when couched in emblems and deep phrases. Nature arms her sweetest kernels with a prickly and resistful exterior, so that they are procured by toil which gives them worth. This poet surrounds his treasures with labyrinths and thorn-hedges that stimulate the reader's onset. The habit is defensible when the treasures are so genuine. To experts and thinkers, who do not need a lure to make them value the quest, such things are an irritation and open to the disfavor shown by many who yield to none in respect for Browning's creative power.

An apotheosis.

Yet it is plain that both the style and matter of his work, after years of self-respecting adherence to his own ways, have at last given occasion for the most royal warrant of fame and appreciation ever granted to poet or sage while still in the flesh. To be sure there never was a time when such a result

could more reasonably be expected. Our period exceeds all others, even the Alexandrian, in literary bustle and research. What organized phalanxes for the study and annotation of our classics, — of course, and as is fitting, with the Shakespeare societies at their head! How rude the capture of Shelley, the avatar of our ideality and lyrical feeling! Old and young, even the "little hordes" of Fourier's socialistic dream, divide the ethereal raiment of the poet's poet, that each may bear away some shred of its gossamer. Shelley's lifelong and reverent lovers, who yield themselves silently to the imponderable, divine beauty of his numbers, and who would as soon make an autopsy of Lycidas himself as to approach his verse with hook and scalpel, look with equal wonder at the tribes which now claim their poet as if by right of discovery and the select few who burden his music with their notes and scholia. To its transformation into a "cult" they apply the stricture of a famous preacher who was concerned at the multiplication of cheap Bibles. The evangelical bodies, he declared, by placing Holy Writ in every lobby and corridor, have dispelled the sacred awe in which it was held, and in fact have made it "as common as a pack of cards." Feeling, taste, instinct, — all are against making a text-book of Shelley's poetry, almost the last reliquary guarded, with some right of distant kinship, by those who claim a humble inheritance of song. The sudden uprising of many Browning clubs is the latest symptom of the rage for elucidation. The like of it has not been witnessed since the days of the neo-Platonists and grammarians; nor were there a thousand printing-presses at the command of the Alexandrian scholi-

Poets and Pedants.

The Browning Societies.

asts. Not only more than one University quadrangle, but every mercantile town, from London where the poet dwells to the farthest outpost of the western continent, has its central Browning Society, from which dependants radiate like the little spiders that spin their tiny strands near the maternal web. Emerson was a seer; Browning is a virile poet and scholar; but it has been the same with the followers of both — a Browning student of the first order can do much for us, — while one of the third or fourth remove, whose degree is expressed algebraically as $B^{\frac{1}{n}}$ or $\sqrt[n]{B}$, may be and often is as prosaic a claimant to special illumination as one is apt to meet. The "study" of Browning takes strong hold upon theorists, analysts, didacticians, who care little for poetry in itself, and who, like Chinese artists, pay more respect to the facial dimensions of his Muse than to her essential beauty and the divine light of her eyes. The master himself may well view with distrust certain phases of a movement originating with his more-favored disciples; nor is poetry that requires annotation in its own time surer, on that account, of supremacy in the future. Perhaps the best that can be said of this matter is that something out of the common is needed to direct attention to a great original genius, and to secure for a poet, after his long experience of neglect, some practical return for the fruits of his imagination.

Dramatic psychology.

A contrast between the objective, or classical, dramatic mode and that of Browning is not derogatory to the resources of either. In the former, the author's thinking is done outside of the work; the work itself, the product of thought, stands as a cre-

ation, with the details of its moulding unexplained. The other exhibits the play of the constructor's thought. The result, as affecting the imagination, justifies the conventional aim — to make us see, as in real life, the outside of persons and events, concerning ourselves rather with actual speech and movement than with a search for hidden influences, esoteric laws. To read one of Browning's psychical analyses is like consulting a watch that has a transparent glass, instead of a cap of gold, surmounting the interior. We forget the beauty and proportions of the jeweled timepiece, even its office as a chronicler of time, and are absorbed by the intricate and dexterous, rather than artistic, display of the works within. Here is movement, here is curious and exact machinery — here is the very soul of the thing, no doubt; but a watch of the kind that marks the time as if by some will and guerdon of its own is even more suggestive and often as satisfying to its possessor. All the more, Browning represents the introspective science of the new age. Regard one of his men or women: you detect not only the striking figure, the impassioned human speech and conduct, but as if from some electric coil so intense a light is shot beyond that every organ and integument are revealed. You see the blood in its secretest channels, the convolutions and gyrations of the molecular brain, all the mechanism that obeys the impulse of the resultant personage. Attention is diverted from the entire creation to the functions of its parts. Events become of import chiefly for the currents which promote them, or which they initiate. Browning's genius has made this under-world a tributary of its domain. As a mind-reader, then, he is

the most dramatic of poets. The fact that, after scrutinizing his personages, he translates the thoughts of all into his own tongue, may lessen their objective value, but those wonted to the language find nothing better suited to their taste.

Tennyson and Browning.

His judicial acceptance of things as they are is largely a matter of temperament, and does not imply that he is more devout and theistic, or a sounder optimist, than his chief compeer. The broadening effect of experience as a man of the world also has much to do with it. Both Tennyson and Browning are highly intellectual. The former's instinct for art and beauty is supreme, and mental analytics yield to them in his work. To Browning poetic effects, of which he has proved himself a master, often are nothing but impedimenta, to be discarded when fairly in pursuit of psychological discovery.

Their differing relations to the Period.

A conclusion with respect to Tennyson, in my review of his career from a much earlier point of time, was that he would be regarded long hereafter as, "all in all, the fullest representative" of the "refined and complex Victorian age." To this I added that he had carried his idyllic mode "to such perfection that its cycle seems already near an end" and "a new generation is calling for work of a different order, for more vital passion and dramatic force." After many years, he still seems to me the exponent of the typical Victorian period — that in which the sentiment poetized in the "Idyls" and "In Memoriam" was at its height. It is equally true that Browning was in reserve as the leader-elect of the present succeeding time. The Queen is still on her throne, but her reign outlasts the schools to which her name belongs. New movements are initiated, and

Browning is their interpreter so far as poetic insight is concerned. To this we only have to add that he is an eminent example of the justice of our exception to Taine's dogma of the invariable subjection of an artist to his accidental conditions. He has proved that his genius is of the kind that creates its own environment and makes for itself a new atmosphere, whether of heaven or of earth.

III.

Swinburne. Cf. Chap. XI.

SWINBURNE also has been a leader, particularly on the side of form and expression, and through his brilliant command of effects which novices are just as sure to copy as young musicians are to adopt the "methods" of a Chopin or a Liszt. Obvious tendencies of the new school reveal the influence of Browning, modified structurally by Swinburne's lyrical abandonment and feats of diction and rhythm.

As he reaches middle life, the volume of his productions becomes remarkable, putting to confusion those who doubted his vitality and staying-power.

"Erectheus," 1876.

His second classical drama, *Erectheus*, is severely antique in mould, with strong text and choruses. But it is relatively frigid, apart from common interest, and lacks something of the fire and melody of "Atalanta."

Recent lyrical volumes:

The author's compulsive lyrical faculty, however, has not ceased its exercise — the resulting odes, songs, and manifold brief poems having been collected chiefly

"Poems and Ballads," 2d Series, 1878.

in the second series of *Poems and Ballads* and in "Songs of the Springtides," "Studies in Song," "A Century of Roundels," and "A Midsummer Holiday." Their variety and splendor sustain the minstrel's early promise; — any one of the collections would make a

reputation. If they have been greeted with less than our old wonder and relish, it is due to the unforgetable novelty of those first impressions, and to the profusion of this poet's exhaustless outgiving. Masterpieces of their kind among the new songs and ballads are the "Ave atque Vale," of which I wrote in a former essay, and "A Forsaken Garden." The translations from Villon charm the ear with a witching sense possibly unfelt by the vagabond balladist's contemporaries. Swinburne is still at the head of British elegiac and memorial poets. Witness the twin odes in honor of Landor and Hugo, covering the entire progress of their achievements, and the second ode to Hugo, the lines to Mazzini, and other compositions in the highest mood of tributary song. A pervasive element of these books is that relating to the sea, of which their author is a familiar and votary. One of them (as also the poem "By the North Sea") is inscribed to his "best friend, Theodore Watts," the poet and critic to whom Mr. Swinburne is indebted for loyal companionship and devotion. The *Songs of the Springtides* are surcharged with endless harmony of ocean winds and surges. "Thalassius," "On the Cliffs," "The Garden of Cymodoce," full of alliterative and billowy cadence, are fashioned in a classical and nobly swelling mould. The unique poem of Sappho, "On the Cliffs," was suggested by the fancy that the nightingales still repeat fragments of her Lesbian song. *A Midsummer Holiday* takes us again by the sea and through the 'longshore lanes of England; its refrain — "Our father Chaucer, here we praise thy name" — recalls the enduring freshness of a poet to whom still the avowal can be made that

"*Studies in Song*," 1880.

"*Songs of the Springtides*," 1880.

"*A Midsummer Holiday*," 1884.

"Each year that England clothes herself with May
She takes thy likeness on her."

"*A Century of Roundels*," 1883.

Elaborate and refined as all these pieces are, they exhale a purely English atmosphere. *A Century of Roundels* is the most simple and distinctive of the lyrical collections. Among the noteworthy roundels are several discoursing with Death, and those on Autumn and Winter; best of all, the clear-cut series on "A Baby's Death." In the latter, as in the cradle-songs and other notes of infancy and childhood, he is winning and tender — in all his poems on age, reverent and eulogistic. The artistic motive of his political outbursts, at various crises, is quite subordinate to their writer's impulsive views; their satire and invective possibly act as safety-valves and are of interest to curious students of the poetic temperament in its extremes.

"*Tristram of Lyonesse*," 1882.

Not a few consider *Tristram of Lyonesse* to be his most attractive and ideal narrative poem. The conception of the Arthurian legend is distinct from that of either Tennyson or Arnold, and the verse is rich with desire, foreboding, and pathetic beauty. The opening phrase, "The Sailing of the Swallow," is enchanting; the description of Iseult of Ireland is a wonder, and the whole coil of burning love and piteous mischance was never before so marvelously woven.

New Dramas: "*Mary Stuart*," 1881.

Of Swinburne's recent dramas, *Mary Stuart* completes the most imposing Trilogy in modern literature, and is, while less romantic than "Chastelard" and less eloquent than "Bothwell," a fit successor to the two. Its vigor is condensed and joined with a gravity becoming the firm hand of maturer years as it depicts the culmination of this historic tragedy — the

taking-off of a picturesque, impassioned, superbly selfish type of royalty and womanhood. The author's consistent ideal of Mary Stuart is formed by intuition and critical study, and is reasonably set forth in his prose essay. The future will accept his conception as justly interpreting the secret of her career. In the Trilogy her fate, through the agency of Mary Beaton, is made the predestined outcome of early and heartless misdeeds, and dramatically ends the steady process of the work.

"*Marino Faliero: A Tragedy*," 1885.

Marino Faliero, postdating by sixty-five years Byron's drama of that name, following the same chronicle and with the same personages, is a direct challenge to comparison. Both are fairly representative of their authors. Neither is a stage-play: Byron's was tested against his own judgment, and he found no fault with the critics who thought his genius undramatic. There is no talk of love in either play, except the innocent passion which Swinburne creates between Bertuccio and the Duchess. Both poets make the Doge's part o'ertop all others, but Byron lightens Faliero's monologues with stage business, etc., and pays serious attention to the action of the piece. Swinburne uses the higher poetic strain throughout; his language is heroic, the verse and diction are always imposing, but proportion, background, and the question of relative values obtain too little of his attention. All know the slovenly and unstudied character of Byron's blank-verse. Swinburne adheres to the type, equally finished and prodigal, to which he has wonted us. In every sense he is a better workman. But the directness and simplicity of Byron's drama are to be considered. The death-speech which he puts in Faliero's mouth, theatrical as it is, will

Contrasted with Byron's drama.

continue memorable as a fine instance of Byronic power. In the modern play the Doge's speech extends to fifteen pages (with the chanting interludes), and this directly after a trial-scene in which he has done most of the talking. Half this rhythmical eloquence would be more impressive than the whole.

Swinburne's later prose.

In spite of Swinburne's deprecation of Lord Byron, and his own more direct inheritance from Shelley, he has several of the former's traits: the scorn of dullness and commonplace, faith in his own conclusions, and the swift and bold mastery of a forcible theme. Continuing the habit of prose-writing, as is the custom of the times, he has displayed his scholarship and versatility in new critical essays. The value of some of these — such, for example, as the prose dithyrambic on Hugo — lies not so much in their judicial quality as in those felicitous critical epigrams which take the reader by their sudden insight and originality. "A Note on Charlotte Bronte" is admirable in this way, for all its tendency to extremes. The volume of *Miscellanies* contains, on the whole, his soundest and most varied prose-writing, much of it as well considered as one could desire, and expressing, brilliantly of course, the judgment of a poetic scholar in his dispassionate mood. It is interesting to see how easily and royally Mr. Swinburne keeps up his domination over an active class of writers. His scholarship, indisputable talent, and Napoleonic method of judgment and warfare render him a kind of autocrat whom few of his craft care to encounter openly, though specialists in matters of research and criticism occasionally venture on rebellion. Whatever ground he loses is lost in consequence of a law already pointed out, which

"Victor Hugo," 1886.

"Charlotte Bronte," 1877.

"Miscellanies," 1886.

operates in the case of a vein too rich and productive. The torrent of his rhythm, beautiful and imaginative as it is, satiates the public — even animals fed on too nutritious food will turn to bran and husks for a relief. And the workings of his genius, from its very force and individuality, are such as he cannot be expected to vary or suspend.

IV.

Stilled Voices.

DEATH has summoned with his impartial touch young and old alike from the cycle of poets considered in our original review. None was more deplored than Rossetti, the child of astral light, founder of a conjoint school of art and minstrelsy, — the most unworldly and nervously exalted of modern poets. No one has made a more definite, though specific and limited, impression in his time. His work was pursued for its own sake, yet the expression of as rare a personality as the fire of Italy and training of England could develop. A collection of his lyrics, piously made by fitting hands, and the critical mementos by Sharp and Hall Caine, render it needful for me to add but little more. Among the rhymes not in former collections, the finely wrought mediæval poem of "Rose-Mary" and the strong ballad of "The King's Tragedy" are prominent. There are also a few characteristic minor songs and lyrics, and at last the full series of quatorzains comprising *The House of Life*, — that wondrous rosary of impassioned sonnets of life, love, and death, — so distinct from Mrs. Browning's yet henceforth to be named with hers as no less inspired and memorable. Another poetic soul, that of the old minstrel Horne,

Rossetti, d. 1882.

Horne, d. 1884.

has passed away in its due season of years, and therewith a bold and various dramatic bard, typically English in his restless, independent nature. *Laura Dibalzo*, a fruit of his ripe old age, though not so equable and compact a work as "Cosmo de' Medici," is a tragedy befitting the hand of a friend of Landor and Browning. Arthur O'Shaughnessy was cut off in the midst of an active but scarcely brightening career. *Songs of a Worker*, the posthumous volume of this young member of the Neo-Romantic group, shows him in his graver and more humane moods, but contains little better than the striking translations from modern French poets with whom he was thoroughly in rapport. Appreciative tributes to his late brother-in-law are still appearing. Philip Marston's life and early death were very pathetic. There is a touching sincerity in his poems, and their finish, considering his blindness, was noteworthy from the first. He had a sensitive and vibratory but courageous nature. Nor was the life of this suffering writer, fostered always by choice and sympathetic associates, without its compensations. Depth of feeling is evident throughout *Wind-Voices*, his last volume. He wrote of it in one of his letters: "I can at least say of these poems that they have come from the heart." Among others who have joined the silent majority, and whose later works call for no fresh remarks, are Lord Houghton, George Eliot, Turner, FitzGerald, Thornbury, Calverley, and the Dorsetshire idyllist, William Barnes. Hawker, the sturdy Vicar of Morwenstow, left the record of a unique character, a few vigorous ballads, and the "Song of the Western Men." Miss Smedley was a delicate, thoughtful poet, of the Tennysonian school, whose refined lyrics

O'Shaughnessy, d. 1881.

P. B. Marston, d. 1887.

Lord Houghton, etc. See Chapters VII., VIII.

Robert Stephen Hawker: 1803–75.

Menella Bute Smedley: 1825–75.

Laman Blanchard: 1804-45.

were marked by feeling and quiet beauty. A collection was recently made for the first time of Laman Blanchard's verse. He was the long-ago friend of Bulwer, Procter, and Browning, a journalist-poet and humorist of the old type, who wrote some good sonnets and miscellaneous pieces of variable worth. A book of selections, made last year by Percy Cotton, from the poetical works of the late Mortimer Collins, receives its warrant through their merit. Collins was a genuine poet within his range. "A Greek Idyll," written years ago, is second only to Dobson's "Autonoë." "The Ivory Gate" has captivating original melody, — a lyric that poets learn by heart. One remembers kindly the natural and even careless singers, such as Collins, who utter their song without pretence or affectation, having sweet voices, and because they can thus express fleeting and spontaneous moods, and in no other way.

Mortimer Collins: 1827-76.

Charles Jeremiah Wells: 1800-79.

The reproduction, after half a century and in the author's old age, of Wells's *Joseph and his Brethren*, was a new example of the fact that both gods and men conspire to preserve a work of genius. Rossetti and Morley among others took part in this ante-mortem recognition of a poet neglected by his own generation, who certainly had no ground for Cato's protest against the arbitrament of the people of a time different from that in which one has lived. His poem, heralded by Swinburne's introduction with tempered praise, — though long, diffuse, with various prosaic interludes, and curiously revealing Wells's absolute lack of the sense of humor, — is still an imposing and dramatic narration, lavish with color and notable for an old-English quality of diction and verse. Its author had drunk so impartially at the

A restored masterpiece.

springs of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Milton, that it wants evenness of tone. But it was well worth reviving, and has excited enthusiasm even in this age of research and discovery.

V.

Notes on surviving poets of the original list.

Matthew Arnold.

THE new poems of several authors discussed in the body of this work introduce few notes that suggest much comment or a reversal of early opinion. Professor Arnold has given us too little verse of late, but his authority as a critic of modern tendencies has steadily widened. Traversing my first notice of him, and as in the case of Browning, I think it right to set down a few qualifications. I feel that the regret and unrest which pervade some of his lyrical verse, and which I thought opposed to the healthy impulses of song, were in their own way as truly the expression of Youth as the romanticism of Childe Harold or Locksley Hall. That Arnold was the representative in his poetry, as he has been a leader through his prose, of the questioning progress of the day — of a day whose perturbation of itself declares a forward-looking spirit — is now more plain to me. Like Emerson in America, he was a teacher and stimulator of many now conspicuous in fields of mental activity. A tribute is due, no less, to his most ideal trait, — the subtilty with which he responds to, and almost expresses, the inexpressible — the haunting suggestions, the yearnings, of man and nature — the notes of starlight and shadow, the evasive mystery of what we are and "all that we behold."

Some afterthoughts.

William Morris.

The most objective of these poets, William Morris, to whom I applied Hawthorne's phrase — the Artist

of the Beautiful, now devotes himself rather zealously to the work of social reform, as if content no longer to be "the idle singer of an empty day." Yet his rapid production of verse has scarcely lagged. A translation of the Aeneids of Virgil, in the sounding measure of Chapman's "Iliads," while not verbally archaic, does not fully translate — in the sense of making modern — an epic that was thoroughly modern in its own time. Morris, with his prodigious facility, has completed a similar version of the Iliads, now just published. *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung* is perhaps his chief sustained work: a timely epic in this reign of Wagner, built up from the German Lied and surely with imposing effect:

> "There was a dwelling of Kings, ere the world was waxen old;
> Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold."

A wonderful achievement, to fashion this monumental work, after re-creating for us the classical and mediæval tales of Southern Europe and the Sagas of the icy North. Of women poets, Miss Rossetti still finds none beside her on the heights of spiritual vision. The fanciful Masque of the Months, in *A Pageant and Other Poems*, strengthens belief that her genius is less visible through such constructions than in brief, impassioned lyrics, — stanzas like "Passing and Glassing," — and her sonnets, of which the series entitled "Later Life" is a complement to that on Love in an early volume. Of Mrs. Webster's new dramas *In a Day*, a terse Greek tragedy, is the most effective. The lyrics and pastoral romance of *Disguises* are its best features. *A Book of Rhyme* adds to the impression that, with all her uncommon gifts, she is too versatile and facile; most of her poetry

Miss Rossetti.

Mrs. Webster.

Miss Ingelow.

is good, but she has yet to write a poem or drama of the highest class. Jean Ingelow's *Poems of the Old Days and the New*, a little graver than those of her springtime, still have many skylark notes. Her ambitious pieces, with the exception of "The World-Martyr," owe their chief value to the songs which they include. It is pleasant to find a general collection of *Songs, Ballads and Stories*, by Allingham, another natural singer. He justly says that "these little songs, found here and there," are not the product of the goose-wing or inkstand; —

Allingham.

> "— they came without search, —
> Were found as by chance."

Many will long retain their liking for the modest poet of "The Fairies" and "Lovely Mary Donnelly." Some genuine harbor-ballads, in a conjuring legendary vein, have been written by Dr. Garnett, whose earlier work should have been noted in my original text. Among the Wordsworthians, Aubrey de Vere is the busiest survivor. His *Legends of the Saxon Saints* and *Foray of Queen Meave* exhibit no change of characteristics. A diffuse closet-drama, *St. Thomas of Canterbury*, written from the church point of view, did not preclude Tennyson from entering the same field. Palgrave's *Visions of England* transcribes many of the Gesta Romanorum in a great variety of forms. "England Once More," at the close, is a vigorous strain. It is odd at this late day to find a critic, who compiled the Golden Treasury, burdening his own poetry with notes, and in a long, collegiate preface defending very simple forms of English metre. Dr. Hake's *Legends of the Morrow* and *Maiden Ecstasy* show him as the same quaint withdrawn maker of symbolic verse; a little more vari-

Richard Garnett: 1835–

De Vere.

Palgrave.

Hake.

ous than of old, yet scarcely to be read at a stretch. In a stray poem of his, "Farewell to Nature," the "pathetic fallacy" of the soliloquists receives the best treatment which any writer has given it.

In these days it is probably a mistake to compose a tragedy upon the scale of *The Soldier of Fortune* (1876), by J. Leicester Warren, the author of "Philoctetes." In length it approaches "Bothwell," and Warren certainly betrays an admiration of Swinburne's verse. But this drama is written throughout with care and vigor, and often with high eloquence, and the lover of true poetry will find much to reward him in its scenes. *Pygmalion* and *Silenus*, by Woolner, have no more absolute poetic motive than his early pieces: cold as the marble of his sculpture, they would be didactic but for the nature of their themes. John Payne, at the date of his last collection, was still a Neo-Romantic extremist. Neither in the powerful and uncanny *Lautrec*, nor in his *New Poems*, is there any more trace of realism or modernness than appears in old tapestry or a vellum book of lays. He is a lyrical Ruskin as concerns latter-day innovations. His scholarship and gift for translation into English verse and prose have been memorably utilized for his renderings of Villon, The Thousand Nights and One Night, etc. My early remarks on Domett apply to the well-named collection of his *Flotsam and Jetsam*, which includes "A Christmas Hymn, New Style," and "Cripplegate"—a poem concerning Milton. Robert Buchanan also has made no new departure. His volume of 1882 confirms our respect for him as a balladist, and he has done few better things than "The Lights of Leith." Of late he has been scornful of the Muse

Warren.

Cf. p. 283.

Woolner.

Payne.

Domett.

Buchanan.

and her Arcadian haunts and minstrels, but has extended with success his efforts as a playwright, — for which a melodramatic tendency, that does not improve his novels, has given him undoubted qualifications.

Marked advances.

Definite advances have been scored, however, by a few of these our old acquaintances. *A Poet's Harvest Home*, by the veteran artist Bell Scott, is a century of precious gems in verse, not one of which is without beauty. The quaintness that would be affectation in younger men is his by nature, and withal a taste and intellect resembling Landor's. It is rare that so poetic a little book appears. Coventry Patmore's strain, in the new portions of his *Florilegium Amantis*, is "of a higher mood" than his early realism of the grass-plot and drawing-room. The odes first published as "The Unknown Eros," in irregular but stately measures, have a fine reserved power — visible also in the striking apostrophes to England. His poem to "My Little Son" is exquisitely touching. *The Renewal of Youth*, by Frederick Myers, bears out the promise of his early prime. He is of the school that regards song as a means of expression, and depends on thought and feeling to animate the simplest forms. The "Stanzas on Mr. Watts's Collected Works" are akin to Parsons's lines on Dante — high praise indeed; and there is a nobility of tone even in his meditative pieces which reveals an unusual character. Roden Noel is another of whom good words may be honestly said — not so much for his more labored volumes, *The Red Flag*, and *The House of Ravensburg* — a semi-drama; but the utterances found in *A Little Child's Monument* spring from the inmost depths of

Scott.

Patmore.

F. Myers.

Noel.

a poet's heart, whose impulsive feeling always must constitute its strongest appeal. The most suggestive verse latterly put forth by writers named in this section is that of Meredith, whose touch never yet lacked individuality. He is another of those novelists, such as Kingsley and Thackeray, quite at home on the poet's own ground. His lyrics *Of the Joy of Earth* (to which a complemental series is announced) have a purpose that reveals itself to one willing to ponder on their often involved, always thought-hoarding lines. He is, with a difference, the Emerson of English poets: "The Woods of Westermain" and "The Lark Ascending" are in veritable harmony with our Concord "Woodnotes." Meredith's talent for melody and structure is sufficient. Even his sonnets are welcome, and whether aptly or carelessly put together; for in each there is some deep or majestic thought, while in fluent measures he runs too much at large. "Lucifer in Starlight" and "The Spirit of Shakespeare" add to our list of important sonnets, and come from one who, in his own phrase, has "never stood at Fortune's beck."

George Meredith.

VI.

Of the poets whose books have appeared mainly since the date of our earlier review, a few are conspicuous for the extent of their work, and demand attention in any notice of the time. What are their respective claims to the favor awarded leaders whom they rival in productiveness?

Prolific writers.

Symonds is fairly typical of the best results of the English university training. He is an exemplar of taste; this, and liberal culture, joined with fine per-

John Addington Symonds: 1840–

ceptive faculties, endow a writer who has the respect of lovers of the beautiful for his service as a guide to its history and masterpieces. A wealth of language and material sustains his prose explorations in the renaissance, his Grecian and Italian sketches, his charming discourse of the Greek poets and of the Italian and other literatures. He has given us complete and almost ideal translations of the sonnets of Angelo and Campanella. Coming to his original verse, we again see what taste and sympathy can do for a receptive nature; all, in fact, that they can do toward the making of a poet born, not with genius, but with a facile and persistent bent for art. The division between friendship and love is no more absolute, as not of degree but of kind, than that between the connoisseur and the most careless but impassioned poet. Symonds recognizes this in a thoroughbred preface to *Many Moods*, a book covering the verses of fifteen years. He proffers attractive work, good handling of the slow metres, and an Italian modification of the antique feeling. There is some lyrical quality in his "Spring Songs." Almost the same remarks apply to a later volume, *New and Old*. Its atmosphere, landscape, and notes of sympathy therewith are so unEnglish that one must possess the author's latinesque training to feel them adequately. We have sequences of polished sonnets in the *Animi Figura* and its interpreter, *Vagabundi Libellus*. These studies of a "beauty-loving and impulsive, but at the same time self-tormenting and conscientious mind" are his most satisfactory efforts in verse; but if their emotions are, as he avows, "imagined," he reasons too curiously for a poet. "Stella" has a right to complain of his hero, and it is no wonder she went mad.

An exemplar of Taste.

His poetical works.

His poems are suggestive to careful students only, in spite of their exquisite word-painting and the merit of sonnets like those on "The Thought of Death." Admiring the finish of them all, we try in vain to recall the one abiding piece or stanza. Here is scholar's work of the first order, the outcome of knowledge and a sense of beauty. Perhaps the author would have succeeded as well as a painter, sculptor, or architect, for in any direction taste would be his mainstay. Nothing can be happier than his rendering, with comments, of the mediæval Latin Students' Songs, neatly entitled *Wine, Woman and Song;* and in the prose "Italian By-ways" his critical touch is so light and rare that we are thankful for his companionship.

Edwin Arnold: 1832–

Those who wish to make more than a ripple on the stream may profit by the example of Edwin Arnold. During the latest quarter of a busy life he has gained a respectful hearing in his own country and something like fame in America. He is not a creative poet, yet the success of his Asiatic legends is due to more than an attractive dressing-up of the commonplace. He has zest, learning, industry, and an instinct for color and picturesqueness strengthened through absorption of the Oriental poetry, by turns fanciful and sublime. Above all, he shows the advantage of new ground, or of ground newly surveyed, and an interest in his subject which is contagious. There is a man behind his cantos, and a man clever enough to move in the latest direction of our unsettled taste and thought. A distinct theme and motive, skilfully followed, are the next best things to inventive power. The *Light of Asia* was not an ordinary production. With *The Indian Song of Songs*

Causes of his popularity.

Cp. "*Poets of America,*" *p.* 465.

and *Pearls of the Faith* it formed a triune exposition, on the poetic side, of the Hindoo and Arabian theologies. Probably Arnold's ideals of Buddhism, even of Islamism, insensibly spring from a western conception, but he conveys them with sensuous warmth and much artistic skill. In these books and the translations from the Mahâbhârata, he works an old vein in a new way. Both the accuracy and ethics of his Oriental pieces have been lauded and attacked with equal vehemence. They have received great attention in that section of the United States where discussion is most "advanced" and speculative, and where Buddhism and theosophy are just now indiscriminately a fashion, and likely to pass away as have many fashions that led up to them. Arnold's longer works may soon be laid aside, but such a lyric as "After Death in Arabia," whether original or a paraphrase, will be treasured for its genuine beauty and serene pledges to human faith and hope.

Alfred Austin: 1835–

Racy critical Essays.

Alfred Austin's essays on "The Poetry of the Period" justly attracted notice. They were epigrammatic, conceived in a logical if disciplinary spirit, and almost the first severe criticism to which our "chief musicians" have been subjected. Here was one who dared to lay his hand on the sacred images. He bore down mercilessly upon "the feminine, narrow, domesticated, timorous" verse of the day, calling Tennyson feminine, Browning studious, Whitman noisy and chaotic, Swinburne and Morris not great because the times are bad, but only less tedious than the rest. While an iconoclast, his effort was constructive in its demand for the movement and passion that have animated more virile eras. When so lusty a critic himself came out as a poet, it fairly might have been

expected that he would at least, whatever his demerits, avoid the tameness thus deplored. But movement and the divine fire are precisely what are lacking in Mr. Austin's respectable and somewhat labored books of verse. *The Human Tragedy*, a work by which he doubtless would wish to be judged, includes an early printed section, "Madonna's Child," which is a key to the poem. The whole requires ten thousand lines, cast in *ottava rima* and other standard forms. The Georgian measures are here, but not their force and glow. The movement is of the slowest, the philosophy prudish, and the story hard to follow: lovers are kept from marriage by religious zeal; they don the Red Cross, travel and talk interminably, and finally are shot, and die in each other's arms to the great comfort of the reader. "Savonarola" is a better work, — a studious tragedy, but not relieved by humor and realism, and with few touches that are imaginative. The title-piece of *At the Gate of the Convent* is artistic and interesting, and is followed by a good deal of contemplative verse, mostly lyrical in form, with the lofty ode not slighted. What we miss is the incense of divine poesy. The author's satirical interludes have point, and I have seen graceful lyrics from his pen; but his ambitious verse, on whatever principle composed, is not of the class that reaches the popular heart, nor likely, on the other hand, to capture a select group of votaries like those so loyal from the outset to Rossetti and Browning.

"The Human Tragedy," 1876.

In every generation there is some maker of books who, without being a great writer, figures as such in his own and other minds. His thorough belief in his function and his hold upon a faithful constituency are things which men of better parts may not envy

Lewis Morris: 1834–

him, yet find beyond their reach. Lewis Morris with his *Epic of Hades*, *Gwen*, *Songs of Two Worlds*, and other works of many editions, seems to be a writer whose fluent verse satisfies the popular need for rhythmical diet. Certain observances usually are noted in poetry of this kind. Its author handles a pretentious theme, and at much length, thus giving his effort an air of importance. He falls into the manner of popular models, and with great facility. He has a story to tell, or some lesson to teach, in all cases trite enough to an expert, but more impressive to the multitude than the expert suspects. Finally, he has zeal and measureless industry, and takes himself more seriously than if he were a sensitive and less robust personage. It would be wrong to say that Mr. Morris's verse is no better than that of Pollok, Tupper, and Bickersteth. But he bears to this, the most refined of periods, very nearly the same relation which they bore respectively to their own. "The Epic of Hades" is written in diluted Tennysonian verse, its merit lying in simplicity and avoidance of affectations. It is, however, only a metrical restatement of the Greek mythology according to Lempriere, and without that magic transmutation which alone justifies a resmelting of the antique. "Gwen" is a drama in monologue — an English love-story, and, as far as "Maud" is dramatic, an attenuated Maud, without novelty of form or incident. In few of Morris's poems is there the radiant spirit which floods a word, a line, a passage, with essential meaning. In "The Ode of Life" he girds himself for a Pindaric effort, and strives with much grandiloquence to display the entire panorama of existence. His truest poetry, though neither he nor his admirers may so regard it, is found

Ambitious facility.

among the "Songs of Two Worlds" and *Songs Unsung*, and chiefly in simple pieces like "The Organ Boy." A longer poem, "Clytemnestra in Paris," should be mentioned for its originality and interest; it is based on the trial reports of a recent murder, and shows the worth of a vivid subject and a conception due solely to the poet. Morris also is forcible, though prolix, in some of his speculative theses, but leaves an impression of infallibility and that there are few subjects he would hesitate to preëmpt.

A survey of these energetic writers leads to the inference that the more ambitious recent efforts do not acquaint us with the new poets who possess the greatest delicacy of hand and vision, and are subject to the most spiritual moods. Barlow's many volumes, and the successive books of Walter Smith, — author of *Olrig Grange*, *Hilda*, *Kildrostan*, etc., — only strengthen this inference. The vogue of Dr. Smith's productions with a certain class is due to the fact, that, like Mrs. ("Violet Fane") Singleton's very feminine poem of *Denzil Place*, each is what she honestly calls the latter — a story in verse. They are metrical novelettes, with the excess of interest and liveliness in favor of the lady, who gives zest to her romance by a warmth of realism, upon which the Scotch idyllist would doubtless blush to venture. His *North Country Folk* contains some good short pieces. Mrs. Singleton's *Queen of the Fairies* is a tender story, purely and simply told. Her drama, *Anthony Babington*, is very creditable, above the common range of woman's work, which scarcely can be said of her miscellaneous lyrics. Her love-poetry is of all grades, and not always in the best taste. Mrs. Pfeiffer has been an untiring producer of verse of a different cast. Her

George Barlow: 18-

Walter C. Smith: 18-

Mrs. Singleton: 18-

Emily Pfeiffer: 18-

early *Poems* embraced, besides a good ode "To the Teuton Woman," one or two striking ballads which indicated her natural bent, since developed in "The Fight at Rorke's Drift," and other spirited pieces. *Under the Aspens* is perhaps her most enjoyable collection. Her sonnets are thoughtful and intelligible, in this wise differing from the work of many sonnet-mongers, and those on Shelley and George Eliot are well worth preservation. In her more arduous flights she often fails, but there is an air of refinement and sincerity in much that comes from her pen.

Harriet E. Hamilton King: 1840–

Mrs. Hamilton King's long poem, *The Disciples*, has been widely read. Four disciples of Mazzini narrate, chiefly in blank-verse and rhymed heroics, the story of Garibaldi. The influence of the two Brownings is visible in Mrs. King's style. Her chief poem, the story of Fra Ugo Bassi, though too long, has strong passages, and effective pictures of Italian and Sicilian scenery. Her defects are a lack of condensed vigor and imagination.

Arthur Joseph Munby: 1828–

There are one or two marked exceptions to the inference just now drawn. When Mr. Munby's *Dorothy* appeared, sound-minded readers had a sense of refreshment. It was a novel pleasure to light upon a complete and wholesome poem, faithfully and winningly going at its purpose, that of depicting pastoral English scenes and extolling health and strength as elements of beauty in woman. The heroine of this unique "country story in elegiac verse" is genuine as one of Millet's peasant-girls or Winslow Homer's fisher-maidens. Seldom, nowadays, do we find such pictures of farm-life, bucolic work and sports, outside of Hardy's and Blackmore's novels. The ploughing-scene is a subject for a painter, and he could find,

"Dorothy," 1880.

A charming idyl.

indeed, a score of charming themes in this one poem. Dorothy's sweet face and noble bearing require, it is true, the device of an aristocratic fatherhood, and there is possibly an implication of the benefits of cross-breeding. Munby equals Millet in honest candor, but I think he goes beyond nature in the one blemish of his idyl; there is an over-coarseness in giving even a plough-girl hands that would disgust a navvy or pitman. As might be expected of the poet who wrote "Doris," that lovely pastoral, he is an artist, and has achieved a difficult feat in popularizing his elegiac distiches.

James Thomson: 1834-82.

A second exception is that of a man to whom a long chapter might be devoted, and whose life and writings, I doubt not, will be subjects of recurring interest during years to come. For it may almost be said of the late James Thomson, author of *The City of Dreadful Night*, that he was the English Poe. Not only in his command of measures, his weird imaginings, intellectual power and gloom, but with respect to his errant yet earnest temper, his isolation, and divergence from the ways of society as now constituted, — and very strangely also in the successive chances of his life so poor and proud, in his final decline through unfortunate habits and infirmities, even to the sad coincidence of his death in a hospital, — do the man, his genius, and career afford an almost startling parallel to what we know of our poet of "the grotesque and arabesque." Shelley, Heine, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, — such were the writers whom Thomson valued most, and whose influence is visible in his poetry. Yet the production already mentioned, and many others, have traits which are not found elsewhere in prose or verse. So much

Cf. "*Poets of America*," *pp.* 230–239.

A sombre and powerful genius.

"*The City of Dreadful Night*," 1874.

might be said of Thomson's work that I scarcely ought to touch upon it here. But "The City of Dreadful Night" may be characterized as a sombre, darkly wrought composition toned to a minor key from which it never varies. It is a mystical allegory, the outgrowth of broodings on hopelessness and spiritual desolation. The legend of Dürer's Melancholia is marvelously transcribed, and the isometric interlude, "As I came through the Desert thus it was," is only surpassed by Browning's "Childe Roland." The cup of pessimism, with all its conjuring bitterness, is drunk to the dregs in this enshrouded, and again lurid, but always remarkable poem. We have Omar Khayyám's bewilderment, without his epicurean compensations. *Vane's Story*, the title-piece of another volume, is similarly impressive, and minor lyrics are worth study for their intenseness and frequent strange beauty. "Vane's Story," though melodramatic, and curiously outspoken in its notion of life and death, its opposition to ordinary views, is not easily forgotten. On the side of artistic poetry we have the Arabic love-tale of "Weddah," and "Two Lovers" — a beautiful legend in quatrains. No one can read these, or the passionate "Mater Tenebrarum," or such a rhapsody as "He heard Her Sing," surcharged with melody and fire, without feeling that here was a true and foreordained poet. More profuse than Poe, less careful of his art, often purposely and effectively coarse, he holds a place of his own. He was a natural come-outer, and declared for all sorts and conditions of men, independently of rank or record. At times he proved, by such verses as "Sunday at Hampstead" and "Sunday on the River," that a blither nature underlay his gloom, and

"*Vane's Story*," 1864.

that happy experiences would have made his song less pessimistic. But if ever a poet learned in suffering, it was he, and if the cup had passed from him we should have lost some powerful and distinctive verse. The posthumous volume, *A Voice from the Nile*, contains, with a friendly memoir by Bertram Dobell, the fugitive productions of Thomson's early and later years.

"A Voice from the Nile," 1884.

The Poetry of Conviction.

Wathen Mark Wilks Call: 1817–

What may be termed the poetry of conviction is not yet without a few representatives. Of these Call, the author of *Reverberations* and *Golden Histories*, is the most facile and poetic. Transcendentalism and positivism are curiously blended in his utterance, and he was one of the first after Emerson to recognize the scientific movement on its imaginative side. He has written, also, verse of an ideal kind, including some winning lyrics. One of the latter, "In Summer when the Days were long," is to be found in anthologies, and usually without the author's name. Miss Bevington's *Poems, Lyrics, and Sonnets* largely consist of earnest, but troubled, speculative verse. Miss Blind is another altruistic writer whose work, in *The Prophecy of Saint Olan*, has feeling, but is a trifle monotonous. Her later volume, *The Heather on Fire*, shows a decided gain in vigor and the art of picturesque word-painting. The radical and rebellious lyrics of Clarke, the young author of *Storm-Drift*, evince talent, but his well-told "Story of Salerno" betrays a willingness to take risks in an ultimately profitless direction.

Louisa S. Bevington (Mrs. Güggenberger): 18–

Mathilde Blind: 1850–

Herbert E. Clarke: 18–

VII.

A look round the field.

THE poetry of many recent authors is still to be considered. They scarcely can be said to initiate a new school, or to divide themselves into groups like those formed by the minor poets of a slightly earlier time. Listening to various masters, and feeling the absence just now of any special tone or drift, more than one new aspirant essays some note of his own. Their very lack of assumption, and failure to claim by bold efforts a share of the attention secured by the novelists, imply a tacit acknowledgment that poetry cannot maintain at the moment its former dominance in the English world of letters. This is an unpromising attitude; but if they do not exhibit the ardent, full-throated confidence that begets leadership, there still are not a few who devote themselves to ideal beauty, and sing, in spite of discouragements, because the song is in them. They bear in one respect a mutual likeness. Though not given to the technical freaks of the recent art-extremists, the work of all displays a finish unknown at the outset of the Victorian period. The art of dexterous verse-making is so established that the neophyte has it at command. As with the technics of modern instrumental music, it is within common reach and not a subject for much remark.

Edmund Gosse: 1849–

Gosse, whom the public first knew as a poet, and who has become prominent as a literary scholar and critic, has not suffered general authorship to hinder his more ideal efforts for any length of time. That he is an attractive and competent master of English prose the leading journals and magazines bear constant witness, no less than his "Studies in Northern

Literature," his edition of Gray, lectures on poetry, and other essays, biographies, and contributions to works that are richer for his aid. All this prose matter has been refined and bettered by his poetic sensibility. And as a poet, the title of the first book for which he was sole sponsor, *On Viol and Flute*, hints of his early quality. Though plainly alive to the renaissance movement, it was full of young blood and tuneful impulse; its contents appertaining to music, art, love, and the Norse legendary so familiar to him. His *New Poems*, six years later in date, are simpler, more restrained and meditative. They are deftly finished, pure and cool, a degree too cool for current taste. His classical sonnets — from the first he has been a good sonneteer — exhibit all these traits. He has a strong and logical sense of form, while his color is keyed to the tranquil and secondary, rather than the sensuous primitive tones. A grace in which he has few equals is the fidelity to nature of his pastorals and lyrics. There is true and sweet landscape, the very spirit of the English coppices, rivers, and moors, in his quiet pieces. Successful with the French forms which he did much to introduce, he uses them sparingly; in fact, he seldom or never plays the tricks of the extreme decorationists, but trusts to the force of his thoughts and impressions. The contents of the volume, *Firdausi in Exile*, may be taken, I suppose, as his most mature and varied work, for the early drama of "King Erik," though creditably done and on a theme quite native to him, does not show his bent to be strongly dramatic. Reviewing his verse, one finds a genuine feeling for nature, and subtile ideality, in "Sunshine before Sunrise," "The Whitethroat,"

"*On Viol and Flute*," 1873.

"*New Poems*," 1879.

"*Firdausi in Exile*," 1885.

"Lying in the Grass," "The Shepherd of the Thames," "Obermann Yet Again." His "Theocritus" has delicious melody and charm. There is a return in his longer poems, "Firdausi" and "The Island of the Blest," to the Italian method of Hunt and Keats. Gosse is an example of the latter-day poet who does so well and learnedly in prose as scarcely to obtain full credit for his natural poetic gift. His verse, like that of Arnold, with whom its spirit is allied, grows on one by acquaintance. It is not often of a swift and lyrical character; yet that he can be both resonant and picturesque is evident from a vigorous ballad, "The Cruise of the Rover," which will bear reading with the sea-ballads of Tennyson and Kingsley, and of itself bestows upon its author the name of poet.

Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: 18-

Blunt's *Love Sonnets of Proteus* are interesting as the artistic and sole utterance of their composer—the record, whether personal or not, of a man's successive love-experiences. This series of sonnets comes from one guided by the foremost English master, yet they are idiosyncratic and do not betray a weak or inexpert hand. Their savor of artificiality disappears when the writer ceases to be introspective, as in the fresh and wholesome sonnet on Gibraltar at the close. While the composition of these Protean verses seems to have been, as a man's love is said to be, an episode, it is plain that *The Love Letters of a Violinist and Other Poems* (1885), by Eric Mackay, are the handiwork of a brilliant metrical artist and poet born. It requires an effort to acknowledge this, after reading the preposterous "Introductory Notice" with which the author permits some absurd friend to preface the "Canterbury" edition of his

Eric Mackay: 18-

book. Despite, however, the flaunting bush displayed at the portal, the wine within is rich and brimming, and of an exhilarating flavor. The series of Love Letters in six-line stanzas, while confessedly of the ecstatic virtuoso-type, is a beautiful and passionate work: its beauty that of construction, language, imagery, — its passion characteristic of the artistic nature, and while intensely human, free from any taint of vulgar coarseness. The poem is quite original, its manner Elizabethan, freshened by a resort to the Italian fountain from which the clearest streams of English song so often have flowed. Mackay's poetic ability is of varied range. The appended studies and lyrics, though conspicuously uneven, all have *quality*. He is a natural lyrist, with a singing faculty, a novel metrical turn, such as few recent lyrists have at command. In some of his pieces we come suddenly upon a prosaic, almost grotesque, fault of expression; but there is a fine impulsive spirit animating all. With the very striking poem of "Mary Arden" we at last have, to apply Lowell's phrase, something new said of Shakespeare, and it is said sweetly and imaginatively. It is a pity that there was any clap-trap in the early heralding of these poems, for they do not stand in need of it.

"*Michael Field*": 18–

A claim to regard was at once established by "Michael Field," through her first volume, embracing the dramas of *Callirhoë* and *Fair Rosamond*. It seemed a reoccupation of Swinburne's early ground, but this was only true with respect to the choice of themes. "Callirhoë" is classical merely in subject and time, and is treated in a modern way, the characters being living men and women with a language compact of beauty and imagination. "Fair Rosa-

mond" is brief, strong; the culminating act of a tragic scheme that has beguiled great artists to its handling. The dramas in this writer's second book, *The Father's Tragedy*, etc., reveal the same vigorous touch, but are diffuse and lack contrasting lights and shades; there is no humor, — speech and action are always at concert-pitch. Their diction, however, is very original. Often an epithet carries force, and is used in an entirely fresh way. This dramatist lacks proportion; her manner betokens close study of the Elizabethans, but of the minor ones rather than the greatest. Her work is notable for its freedom, even audacity, and contrasts in all respects with that of Tennyson — so correct of style and proportion, yet without natural dramatic fire. Her advance in *Brutus Ultor* is not of the right kind. It seems as if she hunted history for plots and themes. This is a Roman tragedy, compressed and over-virile — even coarse at times, as if the effort to speak as a man were a forced one. "Michael Field" is ambitious and has warrant for it. Her motto should be "strength and beauty," and not strength alone. The *Nero* of Robert Bridges, an historical tragedy of the emperor's early reign, with narrower extremes of passion, is to my mind a more essentially virile work. There is a nobler severity in dialogue, which merits the name of Roman. The diction and blank-verse are restrained but impressive. The characters of Nero, Poppæa, Seneca, Agrippina, are distinctly drawn. While in a sense conventional, "Nero" shows the mark of a selfpoised, confident hand. A few of the lyrics in Bridges' eclectic and privately printed volume of 1884 strengthen my opinion that he is a very ideal and artistic poet. The elegy "I

Robert Bridges: 18–

have loved flowers that fade" is matchless in its way, apparently old in feeling yet perfectly original; and some of his songs rival it in their brief melody.

Richard Watson Dixon: 1833–

Canon Dixon's early work betrayed the close affinity between the new ecclesiasticism and the methods of Rossetti. His *Odes and Eclogues*, on the other hand, are the most extreme type of Anglo-classic verse, — that peculiar grafting of modern thought upon the Grecian stock in which Arnold was a leading expert, and which is so fascinating to a scholar-poet. His latest lyrics have a peculiar wandering beauty. All his work is finished to a notable degree. Dixon and Bridges at this distance appear to be the chief lights of a quaintly esoteric Oxford School.

Agnes Mary Frances Robinson: 1857–

Miss Robinson's verse is a delicate spray, engendered by influences which began with Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites, and in the end supplied the motive of British taste in plastic and decorative art, in letters, and in all the refinements of social life. She shows the effect of culture upon an impressible feminine nature, placed among devotees of the beautiful, and breathing its atmosphere from her childhood. Her classical studies were like those of Mrs. Browning, with an æsthetic training superadded that was not obtainable in Mrs. Browning's time. Her first little book, *A Handful of Honeysuckle*, bears the obvious impress of Rossetti, — a shoot from his garden, but with new and fragrant blossoms of its own. The lyrics appended to her next work — a praiseworthy translation of *The Crowned Hippolytus* — were of a maturer cast. Afterward, applying her gift to humane transcripts of real life, she wrote *The New Arcadia*, a group of

ballads in behalf of suffering womanhood and England's poor. Doubtless this was too grave an experimental task, for in turning at last to Italy, and its *rispetti* and *stornelli*, she seems thoroughly at home. Her book of songs, *An Italian Garden*, is the most essentially poetic of her works thus far. It breathes the Anglo-Italian spirit which is in fact her own. The *rispetti* forming her wreath of Tuscan cypress, with their beauty and sadness, are in every way characteristic of this poet, and in her most suggestive vein. Meanwhile her acquirements enable her to take an active part in the critical and biographical industries which the inevitable book-purveyor now opens for every rising author. Of her sister poets not yet mentioned, Mrs. Liddell and Miss Nesbit deserve notice. The former's "Songs in Minor Keys" are suffused with deep religious feeling, always expressed in good taste. Miss Nesbit's "Lays and Legends" suggest immature but promising individuality. She is capable of strong emotion, which is most effective in her shorter lays.

Catherine Christina (Fraser-Tytler) Liddell: 1848–

E. Nesbit: 18–

Theodore Watts: 1836–

Watts, the scholarly critic of poetry and romantic art, and a frequent contributor of verse to the literary journals, has thus far made no public collection of his poems. My knowledge of them is confined to some very perfect sonnets — a form of verse in which he is a natural and acknowledged master — and a few lyrics of an elevated type. His ode to a Caged Petrel shows an eloquent method and a perception of Nature's grander aspects. He apparently seeks to revive the broad feeling of the Georgian leaders; at all events, his touch is quite independent of any bias derived from the eminent poets with whom his life has been closely associated. Among

the many writers of good sonnets I may mention Caine — Rossetti's young friend and memorialist. Professor Dowden, whose critical work is always of a high order, has published a volume of poems, from which two or three imaginative examples of the same class have met my eye.

T. Hall Caine: 18–

Edward Dowden: 1843–

Watson, judging from *The Prince's Quest*, is a disciple of Morris and a good one — a poet of slow movement, from whom we have also careful sonnets and Landorian quatrains. Lee-Hamilton's varied *Poems and Transcripts*, with the studies in *Apollo and Marsyas*, remind one of the sculptor-poet Story by their reflection of Browning's manner; yet where he is Browningesque or Rossettian it is usually because the subject cannot be so well treated in another way. He has a taste for the psychologically-dramatic, and usually interests the reader. "The Bride of Porphyrion" and "The Wonder of the World" are far from commonplace, and his sonnets are exceptionally fine. Dawson is quite possessed by Rossetti, but has resources of fancy, rhythm, decoration. If he contrives to outgrow his pupilage, something of worth may be expected from him. There is much simplicity and grace in the *Poems* of Ernest Myers, largely suggested by study and travel, and they belong to the composite art school. The contents of Wyville Home's volumes are too diffuse, and there is nothing in his *Lay Canticles* superior to a few sonnets in the earlier *Songs of a Wayfarer*. His failures, however, are those of one who aims high and in time may reach his mark.

William Watson: 1858–

Eugene James Lee-Hamilton: 1845–

William James Dawson: 1854–

Ernest Myers: 1844–

J. Wyville Home: 18–

Many of the young writers devote themselves to cabinet-picture making, whether their dainty verse is properly idyllic or dramatic. The scenic tendency

Crayon-Verse.

increases, just as it has grown, with an Irving to foster it, upon the stage. New poets strive, through affecting the mind's eye, to outdo the painter's appeal to the bodily vision. This invasion of a neighboring domain is a failure to utilize their own, and an undervaluation of the noblest of arts. Very pretty things of the kind, however, are often produced in this way.

Edward Cracroft Lefroy: 1855–

A graceful scholar-poet is Lefroy, whose *Echoes* introduce us to old friends in a new guise. His open method is to compress into a single sonnet the tenor of some well-known poem. Gautier's "L'Art," already paraphrased by Dobson, thus appears in sonnet-form, and many idyls of Theocritus are treated similarly. But these are supplemented by pleasing sonnets of English cloister and outdoor life. Pollock's *Songs and Rhymes*, with a prelude by Lang, make up a little book of neat and polished verse à-la-mode, which doubtless scarcely represents the mature or serious purpose of its author. Raffalovich's *Cyril and Lionel* contains well-turned verse of a motive which, although it is not imitative, I find difficult to understand. By his name this writer would seem to be more justified than others in eking out his book with lyrics in other tongues than the English. Since the date of "Chastelard" this practice has been more or less affected by the new men. Swinburne put French songs into a play where they rightly belong, as an *obligato* to the action and discourse. Now every lutanist splits his tongue, like a parrot's, to sing strange words, — but there are capabilities still left in our native English. If such linguistic feats must be essayed, why not compose in the universal Volapûk, — or more mellifluously in the late Mr. Pearl Andrews's "Alwato"?

Walter Herries Pollock: 1850–

Mark André Raffalovich: 18–

Oscar Wilde: 1856–

A phase of the æsthetic crusade in defense of poetry as an utterance of the beautiful solely, — a movement having almost perfect development at its start with Keats so long ago, — has appeared in the outgivings of some of Ruskin's disciples, and avowedly in the verse of Oscar Wilde. His *Poems*, with all their conceits, are the fruit of no mean talent. The opening group, under the head "Eleutheria," are the strongest. A lyric to England, "Ave Imperatrix," is manly verse, — a poetic and eloquent invocation. "The Garden of Eros," "Burden of Itys," "Charmides," are examples of the sensuous pseudo-classicism. There is a good deal of Keats, and something of Swinburne, in Wilde's pages, but his best master is Milton, whom he has studied, as did Keats, to good effect. His scholarship and cleverness are evident, as well as a native poetic gift. The latter indeed might prove his highest gift, if tended a little more seriously, and possibly he could be on better terms with himself in his heart of hearts if he would forego his fancies in behalf of his imagination — as there is still time for him to do. It is fair to accept the statement of his own ground, in his preface to the decorative verse of his friend Rennell Rodd, — though one doubts whether Gautier would not have dubbed the twain *jeunes brodeurs*, rather than *jeunes guerriers, du drapeau romantique.* The apostles of our Lord were filled, like them, with a "passionate ambition to go forth into far and fair lands with some message for the nations and some mission for the world." But not until many centuries had passed were their texts illuminated to the extent displayed by Mr. Rodd and his printer, with their resources of India-paper, apple-green tissue,

Rennell Rodd: 1858–

vellum, and all the rarities desired by those who die of a rose in aromatic pain. Yet the verse of *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* is not so effeminate as one would suppose. The minstrel's greensickness is now well over, judging from his *Feda and other Poems;* and in throwing it off he gives a token of the vigor needful for a decisive mark.

Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson: 1850–

Now, as a minor but genuine example of poetic art, not alone for art's sake, but for dear nature's sake, — in the light of whose maternal smile all art must thrive and blossom if at all, — take *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Stevenson. This is a real addition to the lore for children, and to that for man, to whom the child is father. The flowers of this little garden spring from the surplusage of a genius that creates nothing void of charm and originality. Thanks, then, for the fresh, pure touch, for the revelation of childhood with its vision of the lands of Nod and Counterpane, and of those next-door Foreign Lands spied from cherry-tree top, and beyond the trellised wall.

VIII.

William Sharp: 18–

THERE is promise in *Earth's Voices*, by Sharp, who celebrates Nature, not in a Wordsworthian vein — but somewhat after the manner of Heine and the Germans. The trouble with a long series of studies, like "Earth's Voices" or the *rispetti* entitled "Transcripts from Nature," is that much of it is mere word-painting, and only a few numbers are apt to be spontaneous. "Sospitra" is his strongest effort. Possibly Sharp — whose critical biography of Rossetti is of value — should not be named with the Australian contingent of writers, though some of his

Colonial and Provincial Verse.

sketches and ballads are by one familiar with the South Sea Continent. But there is no questioning the local flavor of Gordon's "Bush Ballads," or the ringing, spirited effectiveness of his lyrics of the field, the turf, and the campaign. Receiving from Melbourne the posthumous collection of his *Poems*, I was at once taken by the dash and verve of this ex-cadet and Australian refugee, — a sheep-farmer, sportsman, amateur steeple-chase rider, and author of "How We Beat the Favorite," the best racing ballad in the language. Gordon's tragic and untimely death may, or may not, have involved a loss to poetry: he was one of the headstrong adventurous spirits whose talent is unquestionable, but whose restless nature and lack of fixed purpose hinder its full development, and from whom their mates are always expecting more than is achieved. Gordon was all by turns and nothing long. There are plentiful traces of Byron, Browning, Swinburne, in his careless style; but when most himself he bears to Australia the relation of Harte to California, as a poet. What originality marks *A Poetry of Exiles* and *Australian Sketches*, by Sladen, is mainly the effect upon one reared in England of a novel atmosphere and sky. Otherwise, *Cœlum non animum mutant* may be said of many colonial poets, and certainly of this scholar of Trinity, Oxford. His key-note is that love of motherland, not yet stifled even among Americans, and which the home-keeping Briton does not fully comprehend. Of a few rising British Canadian poets Roberts, the author of *In Divers Tones*, seems to be foremost. His verse is thoughtful and finished, and conveys a hopeful expression of the native sentiment now perceptible in a land so long only "the child of nations." Toru

Adam Lindsay Gordon: 18–

Douglas B. W. Sladen: 18–

Charles George Douglas Roberts: 1860–

Toru Dutt: 1856-77.

Dutt's *Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, edited by Gosse, are the pressed leaves of a tropic flower that, striving to adapt itself to an atmosphere not its own, exhaled some fragrance ere it died. Her verse was curiously western, while narrating legends of a faith which this "pure Hindu, full of the typical qualities of her race and blood," had learned not to believe. It has touches of lyrical melody, and an aspiration that might in time have strengthened into fulfilment. The list of colonial aspirants in Australia, Tasmania, India, and elsewhere, is growing, and after a season more than one of these imperial outposts will give voice to a language of its own. Among local and provincial verse-makers, Anderson, "the surface-man," may be mentioned as one of the best. His dialect-pieces, and poems "of the rail," are welcome, but when he ventures toward the high precincts of Keats and Shelley he leaves his proper ground.

Alexander Anderson: 18-

Song, Sentiment, and Fancy.

Hamilton Aïde, 18-

Marzials.

The song-writers and makers of popular verse are relatively fewer than of old. Many of Aïde's *Songs without Music* are excellent, — the work of a connoisseur. He preserves for us a little of that spring-time sentiment, without which the world were colder. The later songs of Marzials, who is both composer and balladist, are far more enjoyable than his early rococo-verse which served as a text for a comment in Chapter VIII. As I have said elsewhere, a poet is to be envied who can hear, wherever he goes, his own words and music. In Clement Scott's *Lays of a Londoner* there are some effective, sympathetic lyrics, — "A Prisoner of War," the "Story of a Stowaway," "The Midshipmite," — and apt memorial poems. His lighter verse also marks him as a successor to the London group of Hood, Jerrold, Thack-

Clement William Scott: 1841-

eray, etc. *The Lazy Minstrel* is Ashby-Sterry's latest collection of old-style ditties, and warranted by the favor bestowed upon "Boudoir Ballads." Most of his work is more strictly society-verse than much which goes under that name. A queer but popular field is that laid out and occupied by Dodgson, who, as "Lewis Carroll," has proffered a merry antidote to the hyper-æsthetic and other fads of the day. His *Rhyme and Reason* contains "Phantasmagoria" and "The Hunting of the Snark" — bright audacities in which the fancy that created "Alice in Wonderland" plays without tether, and affords delight to the healthy and fun-loving mind. Courthope, also, has a clever vein of his own. His *Ludibriæ Lunæ*, a light satire on "woman's rights," and *The Paradise of Birds*, an Aristophanic extravaganza, are enlivened by an easy command of measures, scholarly humor, and abundant fancy.

Joseph Ashby-Sterry: 1838–

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson: about 1833–

William John Courthope: 1842–

The few who are bold enough to write poetry for the dramatic stage lead a forlorn hope, and at least deserve consideration. But first a word of tribute is due to Dr. Marston, of whose works a general collection was made in 1876. Some of his dramas were well suited to their purpose, and scenes of true poetry and emotion are not wanting in "Strathmore" and other plays. Merivale is the most elevated of the dramatists not hitherto mentioned, and success as an artistic playwright is of marked advantage to a dramatic poet. *The White Pilgrim* is a good poetic drama, with weirdly imaginative scenes. *Florien*, a later tragedy, is scarcely a literary advance; but it displays the author's skill in historic reproduction, is consistently English, and of decided interest. Merivale's songs — the "Venetian Boat-Song," for example —

The Poetic Drama.

Westland Marston: 1819–

Herman Charles Merivale: 1839–

"Ross Neil," 18–

William Gorman Wills: 1828–

William Schwenck Gilbert: 1836–

Translations.

are especially good, as those of a dramatist should be. "Ross Neil" has been a fertile composer of metrical dramas and plays. Of the many contained in five books published since 1872, I have seen only those grouped with *Andrea the Painter*. They are creditable for incident, situation, language, and construction, but the writer seldom gains a height commensurate with her poetic aim. Wills's *Melchior*, a long romantic art-poem, which I mention as the work of an active playwright, will not increase the reputation of the author of "The Man o' Airlie" and "Claudian." Plainly the shield has been touched with most lightness and precision by the bearer of Mercury's caduceus, — that wit and singular genius, Gilbert, whose *Original Plays*, delightful with humor and pathos, have captured the airiest spirit of our time and added to "the gayety of nations." "Pygmalion and Galatea," "The Wicked World," — and that little poem so charming in scene and dialogue, so pure and original as a piece of fancy, "Broken Hearts," — may not be cast in the noblest moulds of imaginative art; but for ideality, truth to nature, and thorough adaptation of means to ends, they have not recently been surpassed in English dramatic literature.

The field of translation is less persistently tilled than at the date of my former review. The British scholar no longer deems it his bounden duty to produce a fresh metrical version of Horace. There have been a few more translations of Homer, — the most noteworthy being Cayley's Iliad, and the prose texts by Lang and his associates. Kegan Paul's literal and lineal "Faust" appeared in 1872, and five years later Miss Swanwick published her translation of the same drama. Attention has been paid to the Italian and

Spanish masterpieces, and to minor reproductions from the Turkish, Russian, and other modern anthologies.

IX.

FINALLY we observe what has been, all in all, the most specific phase of British minstrelsy since 1875. This is seen in the profusion of lyrical elegantiæ, the varied grave and gay ditties, idyls, metrical cameos and intaglios, polished epistles and satires, classed as Society Verse, the Court Verse of older times. Perceiving signs of its revival, I could not foresee that it would flourish as it has, and really constitute the main thing upon which a lyrical interval would plume itself. Its popularity is curious and significant. The pioneer in verse of a movement already evident in society and household art was Austin Dobson. This favorite poet, by turns the Horace, Suckling, Prior, of his day, allying a debonair spirit with the learning and precision of Queen Anne's witty fabulists, has well advanced a career which began with "Vignettes in Rhyme." Enjoying the quality of that book, I felt that its poet, to hold his listeners, must change his song from time to time. Of this he has proved himself fully capable. His second volume, *Proverbs in Porcelain*, gave us a series of little "proverbs" in dialogue, exquisite bits of "Louis Quinze," and perfectly unique in English verse. Nothing can excel the beauty and pathos of "Good-Night, Babette," with the Angelus song low-blended in its dying fall. The lines "To a Greek Girl," in the same collection, and the paraphrase of Gautier, "Ars Victrix," superadd a grace even beyond that of Dobson's early lyrics. Who has not read the "Idyl of

Garde-Joyeuse. Cp. "Poets of America, pp. 275, 448.

Dobson. Cp. p. 273.

the Carp," and the racy ballad of "Beau Brocade"? Here, too, are his little marvels in the shape of the rondel, rondeau, villanelle, triolet, — those French forms which he has handled with an ease almost inimitable, yet so wantonly provoking imitation.

His many followers.

Perhaps Dobson more than others has shaped the temper of our youngest poets. A first selection from his works appeared in the United States in 1880, its welcome justifying a second in 1885. Meanwhile the choice editions de luxe, *Old World Idyls* and *At the Sign of the Lyre*, represent the greater portion of his verse. Any author might point to such a record with pride; there is scarcely a stanza in these volumes wanting in extreme refinement, and this without marring its freshness and originality. In his place one should never yield — as there are stray omens that he sometimes is yielding — to any popular or journalistic temptation that would add a line to these fortunate pieces, except under the impulse of an artistic and spirited mood.

An École Intermédiaire.

The influence of Dobson and his associates has been a characteristic — a symptomatic — expression of the interval between the close of the true Victorian period and the beginning of some new and, let us hope, inspiring poetic era. It has created, in fact, a sort of *école intermédiaire*, of which the gay and buoyant minstrelsy is doubtless preferable to those affected heroics that bore every one save the egotist who gives vent to them. For real poetry, though but a careless song, light as thistle-down and floating far from view, will find some lodgment for its seed even on distant shores and after long time. The roundelays of Villon, of Du Bellay and his Pléiade, waited centuries for a fit English welcome

and interpretation. Lang's *Ballads and Lyrics of old France*, in 1872, captured the spirit of early French romantic song. Nine years afterward, his *Ballades in Blue China* chimed in with the temper of our new-fangled minstrel times. Such craftsmanship as the villanelle on Theocritus, the ballade to the same poet, and the ballades "Of Sleep" and "Of the Book-Hunter," came from a sympathetic hand. In the later "Ballades and Verses Vain" are new translations, etc., and a few striking addenda, memorably the resonant sonnet on the Odyssey. A "Ballade of his Choice of a Sepulchre" is Lang's highest mark as a lyrist, and perhaps the freest vein of his *Rhymes à la Mode* is in the long poems that do not fall under that designation, such as "The Fortunate Islands." He has almost preëmpted the "Ballade," but his later specimens of it are scarcely up to his own standard. "Cameos" and "Sonnets from the Antique" are at the head of their class, and naturally, for no other Oxonian is at once so variously equipped a scholar and so much of a poet. The fidelity, diction, and style of his prose translations of Homer and Theocritus are equally distinguished. Thus far his most serious contribution to poetry is *Helen of Troy*, — a poem taking, as one would expect, the minority view of its legend, and depicting the fair cause of Troy's downfall as a victim to the plots of the gods. It is written felicitously in eight-line stanzas of a novel type, and, while not strong in special phrases and epithets, has much tranquil beauty. On his working-day side, readers never wait long for something bright from this versatile, inventive feuilletonist, — a master of persiflage, whose learned humor and audacity, when he is most insular, are perhaps the most entertaining.

Andrew Lang: 1844–

X.

Considerations suggested by this review.

If imitation be flattery, Dobson and Lang have breathed sufficient of its incense. Their "forms" have haunted a multitude of young singers, and proved as taking and infectious as the airs of Sullivan's operettas. They have crossed the seas and multiplied in America more rapidly than the English sparrows which preceded them, — so that, as in the case of their feathered compatriots, the question is whether a check can be put to the breed. As I have said, this elegant rhyming, however light and delicate, is in fact a special feature of the latest Victorian literature, and, with its pretty notes tingling on the ear, is a text for some last words in discussion of what has gone before.

First, let me say that it is but shallow reasoning to worry over the outbreak of any fancy or fashion in art. Let a good thing — a much better thing than any form in verse — be overdone, and people will signify their weariness of it so decisively that the quickness of its exit will be as surprising as its temporary vogue.

Question of the outlook.

What conclusions, then, are derivable from our summary of the British poetic movement of the last dozen years? We have paid tribute to the noble chants of a few masters who still teach us that Poetry is the child of the soul and the imagination. But one looks to the general drift of the younger poets, who initiate currents to the future, for an answer to the question, — What next? The direct influences of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley are no longer servilely displayed; few echo even Tennyson; Browning, Rossetti, and Swinburne are more widely

favored; but ancestral and paternal strains are as much confused and blended in the verse of the newest aspirants as in genealogy. Their work is more composite than ever, judging from the poets selected as fairly representative. Only two of its divisions are sufficiently pronounced for even a fanciful classification. One is the Stained-Glass poetry, if I may so term it, that dates from "The Blessed Damozel" and cognate models by Rossetti and his group; the other, that Debonair Verse, whose composers apply themselves by turns to imitation of the French minstrelsy and forms, and to the æsthetic embroidery of Kensington-stitch rhyme, — for in each of these pleasant devices the same practitioners excel. Now the class first named, and the first division of the second, are of alien origin: they are exotics — their renaissance is of the chivalry, romance, mysticism, and balladry of foreign literatures. Only that witty, gallant verse which takes its cue from the courtly British models of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is an exception, — and that, whatever its cleverness and popularity, can hardly be termed inventive.

Stained-Glass poetry.

The Debonair Poets.

The next thing to be noted is the finical nicety to which, as we see, the technique of poetry has advanced. Never were there so many capable of polishing measures quite unexceptionable as to form and structure, never fewer whose efforts have lifted them above what is, to be sure, an unprecedented level — but still a level. The cult of beauty and art, delightfully revived so long ago by Hunt and Keats, has brought us at last to this. Concerning inspiration and the creative impulse, we have seen first: that recent verse-makers who are most ambitious and prolific have not given much proof of exceptional

Artisanship.

Two kinds of limitation.

genius. Their productions have the form and dimension of masterpieces, and little more. Secondly: those who appear to be real poets, shrinking from the effort to do great things in an uncongenial time, reveal their quality by lovely minor work — sometimes rising to an heroic and passionate but briefly uttered strain. And it is better to do small things well than to essay bolder ventures without heart or seriousness. Still, I think they must now and then doubt the importance of thus increasing, without specific increase of beauty and novelty, the mass of England's rich anthology. Looking back, years from now, it will be seen that one noble song on a compulsive theme has survived whole volumes of elaborate, soulless artisanship by even the natural poets.

The epoch. What is it, then, that chills the "heart and seriousness" of those most artistic and ideal? The rise of conditions adverse to the imaginative exercise of their powers has been acknowledged from the first in these essays. It is clear that instinct has become measurably dulled, as concerns the relative value of efforts; so that poets do not magnify their calling as of old. There is less bounce, and, unfortunately, still less aspiration. Nor has the modern spirit, now freed from sentimental illusions, as yet brought its wits to a thorough understanding of what true Realism is — viz., that which is just as faithful to the ideal and to the soul of things as to obvious and external matters of artistic treatment. Here again the law of reaction will in the end prevail. Its operation is already visible in the demand for more inventive and wholesomely romantic works of fiction; and this is but the forerunner of a corresponding impulse by which the poet — the maker — the crea-

True Realism.

tive idealist — whose office it is to perceive and illumine *all* realities, both material and spiritual, will have his place again.

For a time, however, the revival of creative prose-fiction may occupy more than one poetic mind. Novel-writing is more vigorously pursued than ever, by fresh hands. Journalism opens new and broader courts tempting for their influence, sense of power, and the subsistence yielded. Criticism, book-making, book-editing, are flourishing industries. Scholar's work is steadily pursued, and carried even to analysis of living authors. Our poetry itself is too scholarly. A recent happy statement concerning Byron, that he "did not know enough," does not apply to the typical latter-day poet. He has too much learning withal, of a technical, linguistic, treasure-hunting sort. The over-intellectuality and scholarship of many lyrists absorb them in curious studies, and deaden their impulse toward original and glowing efforts. They revive and translate, and borrow far too much the hoardings of all time. Even in their judgments they set an undue relative value upon the learning or philosophy of a master under discussion. Moreover, their literary skill and acquirements make the brightest of them serviceable aids to the publishers. No sooner are their names in public favor than the great houses smooth their way along the lucrative paths of book-making. Great and small houses have multiplied, and printing is easy and universal. To all this we indeed owe attractive series of critico-biographical volumes, anthologies catholic and select, encyclopædias, translations, and texts without end. Good and welcome as much of this work is, my present question must be: Does it not

Cp. "*Poets of America*," *pp.* 26, 27, 437, 463.

Learning vs. Imagination.

Book-making.

chasten and absorb the poet's faculties? Has he not, at last, too good a literary market? The common-sense reply is, that, after all, he must live, — and the belief is antiquated that poets, like caged birds, sing better for starving. Yet if you chance of late upon a unique and terribly earnest bard, — a man like Thomson, — you find that he was out of the literary "swim" and usually out of pocket; while his well-to-do brother more often is the man of letters, corresponding to Southey and Wilson rather than to their fiery contemporaries. If the poetic drama, for example, were now more frequently calling for elevated work, imagination and subsistence would both be subserved. The stage does make welcome beautiful and witty verse of a light order, but what it regularly supports is the facile playwright; and its operettas and scenic plays are logically adapted to the zest for amusement and the ruling decorative frenzy.

Lack of a national style.

The desire of the critic and the public alike, and first of all, is for something new and additional. But that which is new is of higher worth when it contributes to the furtherance of a true national style. What is Spanish, French, German, we at once recognize as such, however different from previous works of like origin; but how seldom the later Victorian minstrelsy is essentially English! A recent article by W. P. P. Longfellow criticises existing tendencies of architecture in Great Britain. He records the progress of a style which advanced to its culmination with the design for the new Law Courts, and until the "Victorian Gothic was everywhere." He writes that —

"Success was due, not so much to the style chosen as

to the fact, that, having found a style which suited them, the English followed it unitedly and persistently. Here seemed to be a national movement, strong, deep, and promising to endure. . . . Then, suddenly, at the signal of two or three restless and clever young men, whose eyes had caught something else, the English architects with one accord threw the whole thing away; as a boy, after working the morning through at some plaything, with a sudden weariness drops his unfinished toy to run after the first butterfly. . . . They have seemed to show us that their progress was at the impulse of whim rather than conviction, ruled rather by fashion than tradition. It is the mobile Frenchman who in this century has set us an example of steadiness. If his work, like all the rest in our day, lacks some of the higher qualities of older and greater styles, it has, more than any other modern work, the coherency and firmness that are at the bottom of all style."

See "The New Princeton Review," March, 1887.

The point thus made has a bearing upon more arts than one. A style of architecture, it is true, is the outcome of centuries. Literary style has a readier formation and is quickly affected by individual leadership. Yet a national manner has distinguished the most subtile and inclusive of literary forms in every important era. This is not sustained by curious devices and imitations, however choice and attractive, but by harmonizing personal quality with the national note of expression. I think there is a lack of recognizable and pervasive style in our English poetry of the period; that, with the exception of the portion which confessedly revives the manners of Queen Anne's time and the Georgian, it is chiefly English in its intense desire to escape from Anglicism.

A deduction.

What does this imply, — style being a visible emblem of spiritual traits, — other than a want, so far

as poetry can indicate it, of individual and national purpose? Breadth, passion, and imagination seem to be the elements least conspicuous in much of the recent song. The new men withdraw themselves from the movement of their time and country, forgetting it all in dreamland — in no-man's-land. They compose sonnets and ballads as inexpressive of the resolution of an imperial and stalwart people as are the figures upon certain modern canvases — the distraught, unearthly youths and maidens that wander along shadowy meads by nameless streams, with their eyes fixed on some hand we "cannot see, which beckons" them away.

Post nubila Phœbus.

It may be that before we can hope for a return of poetic vigor some heroic crisis must be endured, some experience undergone, of more import than the mock-campaigns in weak and barbarous provinces, whereby Great Britain preserves her military and colonizing traditions, and avoids the stagnation of utter repose. The grand old realm bids fair to have her awakening. There are clouds enough to bode sterner issues and nearer conflicts than she has faced since Cromwell's time. Ireland is filling men's ears with her threats and appeals. In a season of jubilee socialists crowd St. Paul's, their banners inscribed with "Justice and Liberty, or Death"; the Marseillaise is chorused in London thoroughfares, and London poets sing — triolets. The wise are not swift to pronounce this troubadour insouciance a mark of effeminacy and declining genius. A great dramatist makes Combeferre, Jean Prouvaire, and their comrades within the fated barricade, heroes all, while casting bullets and waiting for the struggle at dawn, sing — not battle-odes but love-songs. England's

heroism and imagination are not to be judged by her verse at this moment. Whether the Mother of Nations is to be like Niobe, or long with loyal children to rise up and call her blessed, her poets in fit succession will enrich the noblest imaginative literature of any race or tongue, though, peradventure, "after some time be past."

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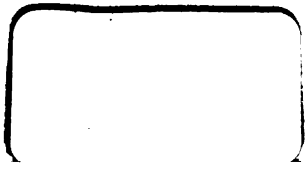
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